BIG LAUREL

BY

FREDERICK ORIN BARTLETT



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By

FREDERICK ORIN BARTLETT

Author of "One Year of Pierrot," "Joan & Co." "The Trifters," etc.



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TO

JOHN WALLACE

A SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN AND AN

AMERICAN SOLDIER

UPON WHOSE MANUSCRIPT

THIS STORY IS BASED

BIG LAUREL

BIG LAUREL

CHAPTER I

WHERE the narrow, rocky road from Big Laurel Cove taps the main highway down the valley, a limpid trout stream refuses to give up its right of way and forces a ford. Here, one afternoon in June, Bud Childers coming down from his shack on Green Mountain stopped to water his horse in the middle of the brook. Lank and lean, he sat easily astride the mare, gazing about indifferently in spite of his twenty-two years. In his inscrutable eyes there lurked something of that unchanging limpid blue which coats these North Carolina mountains. It was not easy to read in them anything except perhaps cruelty; an expression to which the long line of his thin jaw closing on bloodless lips, the high protruding cheek-bones clearly traced by his tautly drawn bronzed skin, doubtless contributed. The hot sun beating down upon his head caused him to raise his black dust-stained hat. A white cres-

cent-shaped scar was then revealed slightly above his left ear clearly visible in his blue-black hair — souvenir of the day that the Enfield boys, stimulated by liquor, attempted, in an argument, to knife him. The Enfields have their souvenir in a marble slab in Mount Bethel churchyard. The memory of this episode was never so completely out of Bud's mind but that the unexpected crackle of a twig sent his hand flashing back to the gun always within reach. It did at this moment as his quick ear caught the sound of movement in the cover of hemlocks and rhododendrons skirting the road at the bend beyond him. His face remained immobile. His eyes were leveled like a rifle barrel. His bony hand was alert. And all for a slight, flaxen-haired girl carrying under her arm a small sack of flour!

She stepped out upon the road, and for a moment the sun claimed her for its own, drenching her through and through with its luminous rays like a spot-light from a distant gallery on the figure of a woodland nymph. It touched with gold the girl's white-clad figure, her silken hair, her wonderfully fair skin, and lighted her eager, young face — a primitive face, but with

the beauty of a wild rose half opened. She might have been eighteen or a little less. Much of the child was still left, but the mouth had already begun to harden and the eyes to question. At this moment, however, both eyes and mouth were gently smiling, moved into unconscious harmony with the picture before her — the slope pied with mountain daisies half asleep under the soft radiance of the setting sun; the sanded road burnished to a golden sheen, and finally the stream in front where the scattered shafts of light spent themselves in flashing from stone to stone. It was a setting worthy of the princes of the fairy books she had lately been reading — reading as children read.

Bud, still motionless, saw her — but not wholly as a prince might have seen her. His eyes noted scarcely more than her pretty figure suggested by the curve of her neck, the litheness of her movements and the trim ankles. Her appeal to him was the primitive appeal of a woman to man. And yet she was not just any woman, even though she was not the first upon whom he had looked greedily. He was conscious of that at once. She was prettier than most for one

thing. And something more besides, although he did not attempt to analyze his emotions. He was more interested in speaking to her. In response to a tugging at his bridle, the horse moved lingeringly out of the stream into the road. Then the girl, startled, wide-eyed, looked up. For a second she seemed about to turn and run. Then, as though thinking better of that, she faced the man. The latter grinned; partly to assure her of his good nature and partly because the sight of any one suddenly surprised was amusing.

"Afeard?" he asked.

She raised her head still higher. She recognized the man now. From all she had heard about him she was entitled to be afraid. But the woods were near and she could run in them like a deer.

"No," she answered quietly.

"I 'lowed mebbe you 'd heard tales about me."

She remained uncompromisingly silent.

"My name 's Bud Childers," he announced.

She made no reply, but shifted the sack forward on her arm as though about to go on.

"What 's yourn?" he demanded.

"Roxie Kester."

He sidled his horse nearer.

"Let me have that air sack. I 'm goin' your way, I reckon."

"It ain't heavy," she replied, shrinking out of reach.

"Might as well," he insisted with his wrinkled, calloused hands outstretched; "me on a horse and you on your feet."

"It ain't heavy."

"Might as well — me a man and you a woman."

"I kin carry it all right."

He dropped his hands to his side again, still smiling, but with the grin of a collie dog ready to change in a flash to a snarl.

"It ain't — isn't fur to where I live," she added in a sincere dislike at hurting him — or any man.

"You been goin' to this air school, aincher?" he asked, quick to detect her avoidance of the "ain't."

"I been goin'," she nodded.

"Like it?"

"More 'n anything I ever done," she answered.

"How long yer been goin'?"

"Six years. Ma was sick last year, but she's better now an' I 'm goin' back next fall."

"Six year o' schoolin' sounds like enough ter me. I ain't been but two, an' that 's all I need. Got me a house over in Big Laurel Cove, got me a cow, and I 'm makin' money too."

The sack in her arms was becoming heavy. She was listening because she saw no alternative, but her face remained blank. Bud noted it with a frown.

"Got me a house," he repeated with slightly more emphasis, "and a cow that give a gallon and a half at a milkin', a good sure-footed hoss and — besides, I 'm makin' money."

"Looks like you oughta be married with all what you say you got," she answered mockingly.

"Mebbe I will some o' these days," he answered, seeking her eyes. But he found them at that moment turned towards a bird in the hemlocks.

Bud shifted his position in the saddle slightly and adjusted one side of his lavender suspenders.

"Ain't no girl in that thar Cove purty like you," he declared.

"My pa 'lowed I was pretty," she answered without embarrassment.

"Yo' pa dead?"

"Three year come this September."

"Who makes yo' livin' fer yer if yo' pa's dead?"

"My mother hires out for washing and I work out. Guess I 'll take the path fer a piece."

The path mounted several feet to an embankment left by the road-builders in grading the course of the road. The roadbed itself, hidden from the sunlight by the dense foliage of the great chestnut-oaks cloaking the mountain-side, was rarely free of mud so that those on foot deserted it here for the path. She started at once and he followed below, losing sight of her at times as she was hidden by the laurel, but falling in with her again where the path rejoined the road. All this while he continued his conversation as he was able.

"A gal like you can't do no good workin' out," he suggested.

"Ma thinks I do tol'able well."

"Workin' out ain't like havin' a home fer yo' own."

"I like workin' down to Mr. Howe's. He 's good to me and so 's Miss Wilmer."

"It ain't like havin' a home fer yo' own."

"They have books to read down there."

"Where do the Howes live, anyhow?"

"The bark-covered house with the porch runnin' round it — this side of Valley Elk," she informed him.

"I pass thet way sometimes. Mebbe I 'll be seein' you off an' on."

"Mebbe," she answered with a little pucker of her mouth.

"Where 's yo' house?"

"Up there."

She pointed to a primitive, clapboarded structure they were approaching on the mountainside.

He turned his eyes back to her.

"Oughta make a trip over in the Cove and see mine," he ventured.

"Seein' yours would n't do me no good," she returned, a bit more tartly now that she was in sight of home. "Good-evenin'."

With that she began to mount the path. It followed a circuitous course through the giant rhododendrons growing on the hillside beneath the house. In June when they were in flower she looked down on an undulating sea of pink.

She entered the house and closed the door sharply behind her.

Bud Childers remained in the road until he heard that decisive slam and then turned and resumed his interrupted journey. It was not often that he went out of his way for valley folk; the round-faced folk with laughter in their eyes. It was more often they who changed their course for him. When he met them, it was he who kept the middle of the road. The life that made him lean had also given him muscles with the resiliency of highly tempered steel. The valley boys with whom he attended the Mission school for two terms had discovered this.

At eleven, having learned to write his name Bud had gone back to the Cove; back to the house his grandfather had built as soon after the Civil War as the Confederate deserter hunters ceased to hunt him through the mountains. And here, joining his father, Bud had his own patch of corn, a newly cleared strip of mountain-side punctuated with half-burnt stumps and decaying chestnut-oaks, showing still the cut, a ring chopped around their bases, that had wounded them mortally and left them there to die. At fif-

teen he was logging, following the logs down into the valley to the sawmill and then making his way back to the Cove. A living was all he claimed of life, and this he could make without wandering far afield.

His father's death left him alone with his grandmother — his mother had given her life to bring him into the world — and this arrangement proved satisfactory enough. The old lady was not good for much except to cook, but she did that until two days before her death. When not at the stove she rocked back and forth mechanically in the doorway, a birch brush stained with snuff protruding from her withered lips. When she walked, her legs followed her uncertainly, barely moving the folds of the dirty gray calico which clothed her. Then one day she flickered out, leaving Bud alone.

At first he did not mind being alone, for his farm and his cooking kept him busy enough during the day. But the evenings were long. Even the old grandmother crouching by the fireplace had made them shorter than they were now. She scolded and fussed a good deal, but she was always some one.

Bud, once or twice, had considered marrying. To get him a wife was the normal and natural thing to do. No house, without one, could be said to be complete. He was quite unemotional over the idea, and in the few tentative proposals he had made among the daughters of his mountain neighbors he was met by an equally unemotional refusal. Unemotionally they had already made other plans, and though Bud was well enough they saw no reason for shifting their affections. Besides, to do this would in all probability involve considerable shooting on the part of certain young men who would be more or less directly concerned in any such alteration of arrangements.

Bud accepted these decisions philosophically. There was no harm in asking even if in the end he did not receive. If the evenings seemed a little lonelier than before after these half-hearted ventures, it was not because any of these young ladies had left their mark, but merely because he had now been longer alone.

Bud moved slowly back over the road he had just followed with Roxie Kester and at the ford where he had met her, stopped where he had

stopped before. The setting had not changed except that the slowly sinking sun was now casting a mellow glow over tree and stream and road instead of the more brilliant sheen of the direct rays.

There at the bend stood the same thick cluster of rhododendrons through which she had pushed. For a moment he waited as though he expected them to open again and reveal once more that slight figure. He found his blood running faster because of this. Then, half ashamed of his mood, he started on with a muttered curse at his foolishness.

CHAPTER II

When Captain Edward Allston, A.E.F., received his discharge from the army, he returned to his home in Baltimore to put up, as graciously as possible, with the fuss about his safe return which he knew he must inevitably face sooner or later. He played his part like a gentleman. For a week he allowed his family to do with him what they wished and accepted with a smile every attention they and his many friends, including even the sub-debs, showered upon him. Within decent limits he even permitted them to make a hero of him, although this, by all odds, was the most disagreeable demand made upon him. He felt that those who had been deprived of the chance of serving directly were entitled to some compensation, and if they enjoyed this sort of thing, this was the sort of thing he should allow them to enjoy.

All this while he was looking forward. He was not consciously tired, but he was confused. His mind was in a jumble; filled with detached pictures of training camps, and troop trains, and

foul-smelling transports, of strange faces and sights and smells and sensations, with the tyranny of military discipline binding together the titanic whole like the steel bands shrunk around artillery shells. If he talked reluctantly to the eager young women who asked so many questions, it was because he was not yet quite clear in his own mind. That was it; he was not quite clear. And he wished to get clear.

The place to accomplish this was not within the four walls of a house, pleasant as the house might be. He needed more room, more silence, more time. He needed the open road, the open sky, and above all an open mind if ever he hoped to get back to straight, normal thinking—the kind of thinking which had characterized the Allstons since Phillip Allston built that fine old Georgian mansion on the banks of the James in 1720 and established the family in America. Ned Allston had always resented the circumstances which forced his grandfather to leave Virginia and those spacious grounds for town life in Baltimore.

Allston remained at home a week. Then he packed his suitcase, tossed it into his low gray roadster, waved au revoir to the somewhat

anxious group who did not quite understand, and started south. He had no fixed plan. He intended to follow the better roads into Virginia and possibly through Virginia into North Carolina, stopping where it was pleasant to stop, fishing here and there, sleeping and eating a great deal, trying all the time to get his thoughts to run straight so that the world might again appear orderly to him.

The scheme worked out even better than he expected. He found it a little hotter than was comfortable, to be sure, but he remedied that by turning west by north and making for the Blue Ridge country. It was all one to him which way he traveled as long as he retained the privilege of traveling in any direction he wished. That seemed to be the one big clarifying idea he worked out on the first lap of his journey. He was now free to free himself and he must guard that freedom. For two years he had been nothing but a pawn moved about by a hand over which he had no control. He had been ordered to go to this place and, snapping his hand to his forehead, level with his eyes, he had gone; he had been ordered to go to that place and, saluting again, he had gone. He had been commanded to

do this and he had obeyed; he had been commanded to do that and he had obeyed. And each time he put into the task assigned to him everything that was in him. He stinted of himself nothing. Furthermore, he did this gladly. The cause was worthy of his best.

But this did not mean that he accepted his lot without a struggle. The only discipline the present generation of Allstons knew was self-imposed. It is doubtful if one of them had ever received a direct order until Private Allston enlisted at Plattsburg. In the following few months the latter received enough to make up for a couple of generations — blunt, bullying orders that roused the fighting blood in him, until his intelligence came to his rescue. That was but the beginning. Doubtless this was good for him; certainly it was necessary. But now — well, it was good to be free. And if he had ceased to plot murder against certain superior officers, he was glad they were no longer about.

It was good to be free. It was good to be able to take the right-hand road or the left as one chose. Or it was good to take neither and stop when one willed. It was good not to get up in the

morning any sooner than one wished and to go to bed at night when one did wish. It was good to meet people without any uniform to tag them. It was good to hear them all speak English once again — even though they did it brutally. It was good to find some, too, who did it rather nicely. Like the young woman at Valley Elk.

It was rather an odd and dramatic circumstance — his meeting with the young woman at Valley Elk. He had no intention of meeting her nor she of meeting him. Until it happened, both would have said that it was about the most remote probability of their respective lives. Wilmer Howe had come up here from New Orleans with her father to enjoy a quiet, cool, and serene summer in this bungalow Mr. Howe had built several years ago for just that purpose. Allston had not come up here for any purpose whatsoever except to try in passing a bass stream he had heard of in the preceding village — a whim scarcely deserving to be dignified as a purpose.

It was mid-afternoon and he had been driving all day. Settled back in his seat, he was not as alert as he should have been so that, when rounding a turn he saw the frail figure of a girl in the

middle of the road, he had no alternative to avoid hitting her but to swerve sharply to the right. The sudden jerk at the wheel snapped the steering-gear and drove him into the bushes against a chestnut-oak. He had not been going fast, but the impact knocked the breath out of him and the broken glass of the windshield cut his face. He pulled himself free, rather a sorry spectacle, but able to stand, and started towards the young woman in the road with the rather hazy intention of stopping her screams.

"Look here," he protested feebly and brokenly because it was not easy to talk. "Don't make that noise. I'm the one to holler."

Roxie covered her eyes with her hands to shut out the sight of his blood-stained face.

"Oh," she moaned, "yer're killed."

"I'm not," he insisted. "But if you keep making that noise I'll wish I had been."

Miss Wilmer came running down the serpentine drive preceded by a barking collie dog to add to the confusion. At sight of Allston she too was inclined to cover her eyes—brown eyes, large and limpid, and, at the moment, big-pupiled—but she conquered her timidity. The collie dog bared his teeth.

"Tam," she called to him. "Tam! Down!"

Allston straightened to attention and removed his cap. His eyes were no longer on Roxie.

"I 'm sorry I stirred up all this fuss," he apologized. "I—I think something must have happened to the steering-gear."

She may have been interested in the fate of the steering-gear, but she did not show it. Her concern seemed to be wholly about him.

"You 're hurt!" she exclaimed.

Roxie, still moaning, had sidled close to Miss Howe.

"Oh, it 's all my fault, Miss Wilmer," she choked. "An' if you 'll let me, I 'll run for the doctor—fast."

The prospect of action seemed to inspire Roxie. She stood poised for flight—her frail body quivering.

"It 's good of you both," broke in Allston. "But, honest, I seem whole. If you could direct me to the village—"

"I hope you don't think me as inhospitable as that," Miss Wilmer said hurriedly. "Our house is just up the hill. Shall I call father to help you?"

He tried his legs again and they seemed to be working.

"You 're very kind," he answered, meeting her brown eyes. "I can make it easily. My name is Allston."

She inclined her head ever so slightly in recognition of his introduction and bade Roxie hurry on. The latter on the instant flew up the road, running free as a wild thing.

Allston found himself making his way by the side of Wilmer Howe towards a grassy terrace before a low-roofed bungalow set upon the summit of the incline. Obviously this was a summer home, designed without much originality, but with good taste and ample means; a house, he thought at once, expressing the father rather than the daughter. He would expect something more distinctive of her. Perhaps it was she who was responsible for the grounds — generous and well-cared-for, bounded by a hedge of balsams giving a trace of formality to the enclosure. And yet, when halfway up he paused for breath — his ribs had received a bad bruising — and looked below over the luxuriant meadows in the valley and the symmetrical fields beneath the radiant sun, he thought she must be responsible for all that too.

A lean, erect man with white hair stepped through the door of the house to the porch, looking very much disturbed. At sight of Allston he hurried forward, walking briskly and firmly.

"What's this Roxie tells me? An accident?"

His brown eyes swept Allston's face and figure and instantly grew sympathetic.

"I hope it's not serious?"

"Not at all, sir," answered Allston. "My face—"

"His car swerved and struck a tree," explained the daughter.

"That's bad. The road there is dangerous. Come right into the house."

He placed a broad hand beneath Allston's arm.

"The first thing to do is to clean those cuts," he advised.

"I imagine it's the only thing to do," laughed Allston. "The car came off worse than I."

"Fortunately. Cars are more easily replaced than heads," answered Howe. "Wilmer will telephone for the doctor if you think it necessary."

"I'm sure it isn't. All I need is a chance to wash up."

Howe escorted him to the guest-room, pretty in yellow and old rose chintz, and pointed out the very modern and immaculate bath opening from it.

"You need my help?" he asked.

"Thanks, but I can manage nicely."

"Then I will wait for you on the porch."

The cuts, while not ornamental, were not serious. Cold water both cleaned them and stopped their bleeding. His ribs were still sore, but that injury did not show. He rejoined his host within twenty minutes very much improved in appearance if by no means restored to his original condition of a half-hour before.

Allston's intention was to express his thanks and make his way afoot to the village at once. He had already intruded long enough on the generous hospitality of these good people. But his polite plan was more easily conceived than executed. It seems that neither Mr. Howe nor his daughter was yet ready to believe—having brought up his bag in the interim and inspected the machine—that Allston was in any condition to proceed. When he came down he found they had arranged for him a large, comfortable

wicker chair before a dainty tea-table laden with cool drinks and cakes and preserves.

"My dear sir!" exclaimed Mr. Howe solicitously. "I could not think of allowing you to go, and besides — where would you go?"

"I was hoping to find, if not a hotel, then some kind of boarding-place."

"There is no hotel, and the boarding-houses are already full."

"That *is* a complication," frowned Allston. Then, brightening, "But there is still the car. I can sleep on the seat if you don't mind my using a portion of your blue sky for a roof."

"With a spare room in my house, sir?"

Allston laughed. He laughed pleasantly, revealing fine white teeth. It was a better voucher than most formal introductions.

"I am indebted to you, sir," he answered, unconsciously imitating the touch of formality which characterized the speech of Mr. Howe. "I am indebted to you — and the chestnut-oak."

But his indebtedness did not end there. Properly he should have included Roxie who entered at that moment bearing a tray. It was she who had first swerved him from the main road. He

found her blue eyes upon him — eyes filled with shy anxiety. He smiled into them good-naturedly.

"All through crying?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," she answered, confused.

"That 's good because it was n't your fault at all."

"It was," she insisted with a directness and positiveness that startled him.

"Roxie," warned Wilmer. "It is n't polite to contradict."

"It ain't perlite to lie, is it?" retorted Roxie with no trace of insolence, but with frank conviction.

"You may go now."

As the girl went out, Wilmer evidently felt called upon to explain her.

"She 's a treasure and I don't know what we 'd do without her. We can't bring colored servants with us from home. There is n't society enough here for them. But I 'm afraid the Mission school has n't been able to change her temperament, although it has improved her English. Somehow you don't mind her frankness much when you get used to her."

"I don't mind even now," returned Allston. "She 's honest, at any rate."

"She's honest and she's good," nodded Wilmer, serving him with cold tea. "And a firm believer in fairies."

"Is that to her advantage or not?" questioned Allston.

She hesitated. Allston was on the whole surprised at that. He himself might have hesitated if asked to consider the question seriously, but he did not expect it of her. And he was more or less puzzled and interested by her answer.

"If she'd only believe in bad fairies too," she said.

"Nonsense," broke in the father. "That's a paradox. All fairies are good. As soon as they aren't, they are something else."

"Father is as gallant to the fairies as to the ladies," she smiled with evident fond appreciation of that quality.

"Wilmer is worried about a young mountaineer who has lately been paying his attentions to Roxie," broke in Howe, throwing some light on the argument. "He hasn't a very good reputation, it's true. But I tell her that a man can't throw a woman over his saddle like in the old days and make off with the lady against her will."

"Which might be true," put in Wilmer. "Except that some of these mountain folk are still living in the old days. Bud Childers is hardly more than a cave man."

"And he's your bad fairy?" asked Allston.

"Or the something else," she smiled. "Fairy, good or bad, is rather a light name for a six-foot man."

Perhaps she felt the conversation had swung into too personal a channel, for deftly she turned it aside to the more general discussion of the effect of Mission schools upon these people. She had rather positive views.

Allston listened politely, but not so much to what she said as to the melody of her voice and to the quick play of expression on her fine face, particularly about the mouth. She had a mouth such as is generations in the making — two sensitive lips, full without being too full, thin without being too thin, balanced nicely, almost exquisitely, above a firm, if rounded chin. Her straight nose matched the chin rather than the mouth. It came from her father rather than her mother, he thought. The eyes were a girl's eyes grown, by much reading, a bit mature before her

time. She controlled them a little too well for youth, perhaps, and yet at moments Allston caught in them flashes as wayward as sunbeams.

Then, somehow, Allston found the conversation back in the personal channel—this time sweeping his own life into the current. He felt a certain obligation here. So as briefly as possible he filled in enough of his past to give them some slight understanding of who he was and why he was here. He found them both eager listeners and when he had done, the dusk was well upon them. Howe rose and extended his hand as though to welcome a new guest.

"I feel honored more than ever," he said a little pompously but sincerely, "to entertain a man who fought for democracy."

CHAPTER III

Bud Childers sat before the open fire in his log shack on Big Laurel Cove. He sat alone. It is not good for a man to be alone unless he is either poet or philosopher. Bud was neither. And yet, on the board table which, with a few rough chairs, was the only article in the way of furniture the room contained, stood a bottle and in the bottle a withered branch from a laurel bush, plucked just beyond the ford where he had first seen Roxie Kester. It would have been foolhardy of any one to accuse Bud of expressing here a poetic idea. The chances are that he would have accepted this as a challenge. He knew nothing about poets or poetry or poetic ideas, he was not that kind. Maybe a squirrel brought in the branch, and if any one cared to dispute that statement Bud was ready.

But no one did dispute it. He was alone. Being alone will play strange tricks with a man—with any man. It will bring to light, like digging in the ground, many curious things, both good and bad.

Two weeks had passed since Bud first met Roxie — a disappointing two weeks. Four times within that period he had waylaid her on the road before the Howe house and walked by her side as far as her home. He had spoken her fair and spoken her foul — losing his temper once and making a threat. Maddened by her stubbornness he had rested a heavy hand upon her arm.

"Y' are comin'," he had said. "Y' are comin' if I hev to carry yuh."

And she, pulling herself free, had clenched her two little fists.

"If we had us men-folks home, you 'd be slow sayin' that, Bud Childers."

Which was not altogether true. Men-folk or no men-folk, he meant to have her. He meant to have her because he wanted her more than he had ever wanted anything in his life. There was something peculiar about this. He had desired things before, but never like this. If what he wished came easily, he took it; if not, he forgot. As long as he had a roof over his head, a plot of land of his own, enough to eat, and a little money, he could always worry along. Mostly he lived each day as it came, content enough in his moun-

tain kingdom. Even when he first began to feel the loneliness of the nights and to look about for a wife, it was with indifferent interest in the woman herself. His interest in Roxie was, perhaps, even at the start, quicker than that he had ever felt for others of her sex, but he had not anticipated any such desire as that which had now taken possession of him.

He had wanted her first because she was a woman and he a man. Then he had wanted her because she was good to look upon; dainty and clean-limbed and shy as a fawn. Finally he wanted her because she was Roxie Kester; because she was herself. Just what this meant he did not know, except that now, to-day, he felt she was the one woman who could ever break his loneliness; this new loneliness which she herself had created.

It is one thing to be lonely; another to be alone. Without her, he was alone. This did not mean merely that he was by himself. That is a negative condition. It meant an acute consciousness of the absence of another. That is positive. It left him not content to wait, and impelled him to action.

Bud was like a child in his impatience over delay. Patience is not an inborn virtue; it is the product of high development. It involves self-control which is the ultimate goal of civilization. Like a child, too, Bud felt a desire to be equivalent to a proprietary right. Wanting Roxie, he was entitled to her.

And so, sitting alone before his fire rolling and smoking innumerable cigarettes, Bud planned how he might get her. To him it seemed only a matter of gaining possession. The future would look after the rest. He was sure of himself there. She was stubborn and as full of fight as a mountain wildcat, but she would tame. He even smiled a little in anticipation of that struggle. She would tame. He had broken horses and he had broken men. His thin lips hardened. He could also break a woman.

Break her, yes, but after that, he could break any one else who tried to harm her. Once she was his own, then valley folk or mountain folk had better have a care how they trespassed. He would relish the opportunity to prove himself. He would relish it at this moment. God, if only he could get out and shoot for her! If only it were as simple as that!

But it was not some one else he must fight now; it was the girl herself. She had heard stories about him. That was the trouble. Well, some of them were true enough, but they had nothing to do with the present. What was past was past. He had done nothing but defend his rights. Once she was his, he would defend her rights too.

The thing to do first was to get her. There was just one way to accomplish this if she would n't come; that was to bring her. He could not carry her before a minister against her will, but he could fetch her up here. He could keep her here one night and then — she would go to the minister quickly enough after that.

Bud's breath came faster as he planned. His face hardened around the mouth, but it grew mellow about the eyes. To have her here — to have her here! It was something to grow breathless about just to picture her — say in that chair over yonder. She might tear at him with her little fingers; she might cry, but even so she would be here. She would be part of this room; part of his life. He would no longer be alone.

Then, lifting his hectic eyes, Bud caught sight of the sprig of laurel in the bottle on the table.

It was like a bit of her—like her in a tender mood, a pleading mood. He rose and paced the room, his gaunt shadow following him silently. He didn't want to hurt her. He didn't mean for to hurt her. He was going to marry her all right and proper, and she'd be glad as soon as she got used to him. He'd give her everything she wanted; plenty of new dresses and money and candy. He'd go down to the village with her and let her buy all the new furniture she wanted. He'd let her keep the house clean and he would wipe the mud off'n his feet when he came in. He'd aim to please her every way she wanted. In a little while she'd get used to him.

So Bud planned, and the sooner his plans were carried out the better. There was n't any sense in keeping her riled up or in keeping himself riled up. To-morrow night was as good as any. No sense in keeping riled up.

CHAPTER IV

It was little Tom Culley, weasel-faced and dirty, who, for a pint of moonshine whiskey offered by Bud, took to Roxie at the Howe bungalow one night the lying message that her mother was sick and the summons to come home at once. For the previous three days Bud had waited from dusk until dark only to be forced back over the trail to Big Laurel Cove disappointed and alone. The girl had not come out.

Roxie herself might have found difficulty in explaining why she kept so tight within doors, for it was not wholly on account of Bud Childers. True enough the man had been pestering her; had followed her home against her will and made his threats. And yet when quite honest with herself she knew she was not afraid of him. He might pinch her arm with his big hand, and he might scowl, and he might say he was going to do this and do that, but in the end what could he do? Once she had cowed him with a smile, and once again she had said to him in a voice hardly above a whisper:

"Bud Childers — stop."

And he had stopped.

It had given her a new sense of power.

He was more a nuisance than anything else — a nuisance at a time when she wanted to be left alone with her thoughts. If Bud had been able to read these, he would have waited even more restlessly than he did, down there by the ford. There were others, too, who might have grown restless.

But the thoughts of a young woman, until she chooses to voice them, are her own. They are her sacred city. Bold adventurers or the merely curious may try to enter through the eyes and guess what lies behind, but it is more than probable they will guess wrong. At any rate, they can never know with certainty if only the lady keeps her lips sealed.

And that, Roxie — cross her throat and hope to die — meant to do. It was her one excuse for not at the very beginning running from her dreams like a startled fawn. She could not be blamed for getting them — they came from around a corner as suddenly as Allston's machine had that day; but she could be blamed for keeping them. Way down deep in her romantic little

heart — where half of what she knew came from — she understood her danger. It was one thing to have a fairy prince safe within the covers of a story-book, where he could be shut in again at the end of the day, and quite another to have him walking around the house in flesh and blood, sometimes within arm's length, where closing a door upon him did no good whatever. Because often enough she could still hear his voice as he talked to Miss Wilmer or at least hear his footsteps as he strode about his room.

Allston had risked his life to save her life. That was the beginning of her dream. He had done a fine thing, as a prince might do it — head up, a smile on his lips, and quietly. He had staked his life for hers — even when she was at fault. And this gave a new value to her life. It gave a new dignity. One moment she was nothing much to any one; the next, more than a king's ransom — a king's son — had been offered for her.

If, after this, he had vanished, it would still have been safe for Roxie to dream on. Princes are harmless enough until they begin to stalk around in the daytime. Then they become dangerous — however well meaning.

Allston stayed on. This was at the suggestion of Howe. Certain parts of the wrecked car had to be sent away for and this took time. Besides, there was no especial reason why he should not remain, anyway — as far as he or any one else could see at the time. Both father and daughter proved congenial to him and he, apparently, proved congenial to them. He had driven far enough to get a certain amount of restlessness out of his system and the idea of basking for a while beneath this golden sun rather appealed.

So Roxie cooked his breakfast and served it to him; so, too, she did his lunch; so, too, his dinner. She cared for his room — humbly, gratefully, almost religiously. She made his bed and smoothed out his pillows with her eyes aglow. She picked up all his things — he was none too tidy — and placed them where they belonged. She even polished his shoes. He caught her at it once. She was using his kit when by chance he came back into his room after some forgotten thing. She did not know he was there until she felt his hand on her shoulder.

"Roxie," he said quietly, "I 'll do that myself."

Startled, she faced him.

"It's a man's job," he explained.

"But I don't mind—honest I don't."

"But I mind," he returned.

She dropped the brushes obediently and he went out. Allston had never been able to accustom himself in France to the sight of women burdened with the tasks of men.

Roxie gathered brown-eyed Susans and placed them in his room—secretly. And happily. And when he came downstairs with one of the posies in his buttonhole, she felt like singing. He did not know she had picked them, but that made no difference to her. She was asking no reward for her service other than he had already given; other than he was giving her every day he remained.

Allston, for his part, spoke her fair always; without either condescension or boldness. She was white; she was young; she was native. She was, he felt, in every way entitled to his respect. Even to the Howes she was more like one of the family than a servant. To Allston she possessed the added interest of a whimsical personality new to him so that he never missed an opportunity of speaking to her.

"I suppose these folk are more nearly native

American than most," he once suggested to Wilmer.

"The American of eighteen-fifty," she answered.

Hesitatingly one day Allston took from his wallet a dollar bill, prompted solely by the desire to recompense her for the extra work he felt he had occasioned.

"This is for you," he explained.

"What fer?" she demanded.

"For ribbons or anything you need. I've been a lot of bother."

"You ain't bothered me none."

"But—"

"You ain't bothered me none."

"I've made you more work."

Her face colored as it always did in spite of herself when she tried to talk to him.

"I don't call that bother," she replied.

"Well," he laughed. "Then all I can do is to thank you again."

"That's—enough," she said.

As it turned out, however, Allston did find an opportunity to do a little more. When Roxie came to Wilmer with that message from Tom

Culley reporting her mother's sickness, it was already dark. Even so, had it not been for the recent advances of Bud Childers to Roxie, Wilmer would have considered the walk safe enough for the girl. As it was she was a bit worried. Voicing her fears to her father, Allston overheard.

"I'll go along with her," he suggested on the instant.

Howe demurred a moment.

"I don't suppose there's any danger, but those mountain folk are a queer lot."

"What do you mean?"

"If Childers should be along the way—"

He paused a moment, and then added:

"He's pretty free with a gun."

"That's simple," answered Allston. "I'll carry one myself."

"I don't imagine you'll need it, but it might be as well to have it."

So Allston thrust his automatic in his pocket and immediately forgot it. He joined Roxie and she led the way from the open valley to the winding, rocky road which ran along the thickly wooded mountain-side. The hush of the early night was here. The great symphony of the for-

est's nocturnal players had not yet begun their overture, awaiting the last bar of the catbird's vesper song. High above the trees a full moon furnished a silver light where it could get through.

Roxie was as surefooted as he, but instinctively he steadied her with his hand. She was, if anything, less steady after that than before. It was as though she became a little dizzy.

"Am I going too fast for you?" he asked.

"No, sir."

Yet twice she stumbled and would have fallen had he not caught her.

"Careful there," he warned. "It's a rough old road."

So they came to the bend. Rounding it, the girl was the first to see the dim figure of a man on horseback a few paces before them. Against the impenetrable background of foliage, the sharply drawn contour of the rider's face stood out like the countenance of a monk from a black cowl.

It was Bud. She could see him only dimly, but she knew his eyes had left her to question the man by her side. And she caught the slow, stealthy movement of his hand creeping back to his hip.

CHAPTER V

Allston, at first, was not inclined to take the situation seriously. The scene, like an act of melodrama, was not sufficiently motivated to convince him. Here was a dark, scowling figure of a man on horseback planted squarely in the middle of the moonlit road—a villain made to order. Clinging to his arm, Allston felt the tight grip of Roxie's warm fingers—the heroine if one wished so to consider her. And he—well, it looked as though he were cast for the part of hero. But he did not know his lines.

Had this been France and a year ago, he would have been quick enough to react to the danger. The world was at war then and he was tuned up to it. Often enough on night patrol he had walked straight into the heart of even grimmer drama than this and played his rôle like a veteran, with life the penalty of a miscue.

But he had left all that behind him. The world was now at peace. It was surprising how quickly he had been able to forget that trees meant possible ambush and that moonlight in open spaces

was a source of deadly danger. Men no longer were enemies and beautiful young women no longer needed rescuers. Civilization had reasserted her rights and bade men walk once again relaxed and at their ease.

Even at this moment, Allston viewed the scene more as an effective picture than anything else. Bud, lank and lean, made rather a striking figure of the solitary horseman type. He had jerked up the mare's head, and she, a bit frightened by the figures in the shadows, pricked forward her ears and snorted impatiently. In the silver light the two were rather spooky. As they stood there, silent and immobile now, it would not have greatly surprised Allston if it developed that the rider had no head.

But Roxie Kester knew better. The man before her was no apparition. He was a grim reality. And his silence did not imply passiveness. She understood the meaning of that slight forward bend of his head and the significance of that quietly moving arm creeping towards the gun at his hip. And she knew better than anything else the interpretation Bud would place upon the presence of this stranger by her side. Her wildly

beating heart—beating like a frightened bird at the approach of a hostile hand—told her that.

Yet for a moment she also stood transfixed. She like the two men resembled a figure cut out of black paper. It was as though the night birds had also come to this conclusion, for softly, here and there in the trees and bushes roundabout, they ventured forth once more into cooing calls.

Roxie was the first to speak. She moved forward a step, and thereby, without any realization on Allston's part of what she was doing, placed herself between the two men.

"Hullo, Bud," she said.

"Hullo, Roxie," he answered.

"I 'm goin' hum 'cause ma 's sick," she explained.

"Yo' ma 's sick?"

"Little Tom Culley—he sent word."

"Needed a stranger ter show the way, I reckon?"

"He 's a frien' o' Miss Wilmer," she answered almost eagerly.

"Then," said Bud, deliberately—"then he oughter stay with Miss Wilmer. It ain't healthy in these hills—fer strangers."

Bud had reached his gun. He brought it forward, at this point, rather ostentatiously, and rested it on the pummel of his saddle.

"Bud!" cried Roxie.

But Allston, in the meanwhile, had reached his own gun. He had no desire to force any issue here unless it proved necessary. His instinct, however, warned him that he could no longer keep himself in the background. His temper, moreover, had been pricked by the studied insolence of Bud's reference to strangers. When he acted, he acted quickly. With his raised automatic he jumped forward.

"Throw down that gun," he ordered.

Bud made a motion and Allston fired. He was a sure shot and he had learned well his lesson that when any firing is to be done, it is well to fire first. He aimed at the weapon in Bud's hand and the gun spun out of the lean fingers into the bushes. The mare jumped and Roxie screamed. The birds in the woods became instantly hushed. With an oath Bud checked his horse and turned as though to ride the two down. But the automatic was still leveled and the brown eyes behind it quite untroubled.

"Steady there," warned Allston.

"You ugly, pink-cheeked hornyhead," choked Bud, "I'll cut yer heart out fer that."

"Steady," repeated Allston.

"It ain't healthy here fer strangers, particular when they messes in somethin' that don't concern 'um."

"But when it does concern them?" questioned Allston.

Bud turned from Allston to Roxie. She shrank closer to her protector which exasperated Bud still more.

"Like 'um pink-cheeked and white-fingered, don' cha," he growled.

Allston lost the last remnant of his patience at that. He pulled the girl to the side of the road.

"Now," he commanded, "you move on."

Helpless Bud turned his horse in the direction of the Kester house.

"Not that way — this," ordered Allston pointing to his rear.

His voice was metallic. His words were as decisive as a military order. Men from Gibraltar to Timbuktu recognize that quality.

Bud swung his horse and with an oath can-

tered past the two. Allston stood facing in the same direction until assured by the receding clatter of the hoofs merging into the forest silence that the man did not pull up when out of sight. Then he thrust his automatic back in his pocket.

Almost impatiently, he turned to the girl. He found her bright eyes upraised to his. Her pretty face was flushed with excitement — and something more. In the tender, softening light of the moon — lovers' light — he caught an expression which brought the color to his own cheeks. He breathed a little faster as he allowed his eyes to meet her eyes. Her lips were tight as though she were deliberately making them tight to imprison her tongue. Her head was a little back — a quite unconscious pose of silent supplication. Her body was lax. Her arms hung loosely by her side — the long, slender arms of a girl.

To Allston at the moment she seemed almost a product of the forest, like some delicate fern bred in the wild, but possessing an exquisiteness beyond the reach of the most skilled florists; possessing, too, the sturdiness that Nature gives, but which the hothouse sacrifices. Again she reminded him of some of those young women of

France at once so intensely human and so instinctively spiritual. There were such faces, passed in the day's grim work, which still haunted him. So, he felt, this face before him always would haunt him.

The moonlight—the moonlight! The silence—the silence! The hush of a stilled world with all harsh things made beautiful by night! The girl with eager, motionless lips, one with the growing things that bid a man take as he finds!

Allston shook himself free from the spell, breathing deeply.

"Come," he said, "it—it is time we went on."

Slowly, like a drooping flower, Roxie's head lowered. Her limp arms stiffened. Her lips tightened even more. She fell into step by his side as he led the way at a faster pace than before along the mountain road leading to her home.

Where the circuitous path ended in a clearing before her house, Allston left her.

"I guess you're safe enough now, Roxie."

"Yes, sir," she answered.

"And I hope you won't find your mother very sick. If you think there's anything more I can do—"

"No, sir," she broke in hurriedly, "I reckon there ain't — is n't."

"Then we 'll see you in the morning?"

"I 've gotter git yo' breakfast."

"Not if your mother needs you."

"I 've gotter git yo' breakfast."

"We can manage somehow."

"I 've gotter cook you hot muffins. Miss Wilmer she cain't do that."

"Can't she?" he smiled. "Then we must manage without them."

"No, sir. I gotter do that."

"Well, we 'll see. If you don't come I 'll call here in the morning."

She looked frightened.

"I reckon yer better not," she decided.

"Eh?"

"Yer better not."

"But I will," he replied.

"Please, Mister Allston — that Bud — "

Allston shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"I 'll let him do the worrying."

"Only yer don't know Bud. He don't ferget."

"That ought to be in my favor — if he does n't forget," he suggested. "But you don't think for a moment he 's going to keep me off the road?"

"No," she answered instantly. "That 's why I 'm afeard fer you."

There was almost a mother light in her eyes. Impulsively Allston took one of her warm hands in his.

"You 're a good little girl," he said tenderly. "But you 've got worries enough of your own without including me. Good-night."

"Good-night," she answered.

Her voice was as cooing low and sweet as that of a night bird. He dropped her hand and started to retrace his steps. Once he turned. He found her looking after him.

"Good-night," he called back. "Don't worry."

But Roxie stood there, never moving until she could no longer hear even the lightest trace of his footsteps. Then she lifted her eyes to the stars. They smiled back at her. She thought they were like his eyes. Only they were so high—so dizzily far away. They were above the house, above the trees, above even the heights of Caterpillar Ridge, above Green Mountain, which was the highest place she knew about. They were almost as high as God. He lived there among them. And yet the preacher said that He was

always near—right around us everywhere. So the stars must be nearer than they looked. So perhaps the eyes of the Prince might be nearer than they seemed. Things could be far away and yet very near. That was confusing. Also it was comforting. The puzzled frown left her face as she pushed open the door and went in.

She found her mother busy about her normal tasks and showing no evidence of illness. But the sight, instead of bringing her relief, roused a new fear.

"Tom Culley said yuh was tuk sick," explained Roxie, as her mother observed her entrance with as much surprise as she ever showed about anything. Her emotions had ceased to be more than the ghostly relics of emotions long since dead. She had exhausted them years before. Resignation had taken their place.

"I ain't sick," she answered with a slow shake of her head. "How cum Tom Culley to say thet?"

Her pale eyes squinting from a meager, desiccated face, white as wax, listlessly met the quick young eyes of her daughter.

The answer was clear enough to Roxie. It ex-

plained the presence of Bud Childers in the middle of the road. The girl turned towards the door.

"I'm a-goin' back," she said.

"Goin' back?"

But Roxie sprang for the latch. If Bud Childers had laid for her such a plot as this, the incident would not end there. He would be waiting for Allston to return. She threw open the door and ran out into the night; straight down the rocky mountain road. And as she ran, she called his name.

"Mister Allston! Mister Allston!"

There was no answer. Allston, far ahead, was walking fast.

CHAPTER VI

As ten o'clock came and then eleven, Wilmer found it more and more difficult not to respond to her father's fears.

"We should n't have allowed him to go," declared Howe.

"And yet," answered the girl, "he 's the sort of man you feel to be capable of going anywhere."

"I don't doubt his courage," responded Howe. "But against a man of the type of Childers he needs something more."

"What do you mean, dad?"

"He needs to know his man. Childers has no code. If he could n't shoot a man in front, he 'd shoot him in the back. Such a chap has one idea and only one — to get his man; by fair means, if convenient, by foul, if necessary."

"You don't think Childers means to — to get him?"

"I don't know anything about it. Apparently the fellow is infatuated with Roxie. If that is so, he 'll resent any interference — particularly on

the part of a stranger. I ought to have known better than to let him start."

"I doubt if you could have prevented it, dad," answered the girl.

"It was my duty — as host."

Wilmer turned back to her book — a Galsworthy novel. That seemed to be about as far as she could get in it to-night — just to turn back to it again and again. The pages in which ordinarily she was able to lose herself were just so many white pieces of paper covered with print. They were very white and symmetrical and the print very black and even, making so many parallel lines from side to side. But there was a certain monotony to literature in this form. It seemed scarcely worth while to turn the leaves.

In the two weeks Wilmer had been living in daily contact with Allston — a more sustained contact than she had ever experienced with any man of her own age — she had developed a very real interest in him. Her life for the last five years, since the death of her mother, had been largely devoted to her father. By nature quiet and reflective, she had found this sphere adequate enough on the whole to satisfy her, and where it

did not she was able to piece it out with her books. She read a great deal and intelligently without, however, any especial objective. She preferred, generally speaking, books with an analytical turn and modern rather than classic—James and Meredith, and the younger school of British novelists with their intense if somewhat vague passion for the super-critical and radical approach to present-day problems. And yet the net result of their influence was to leave her rather more conservative than before. She was willing enough to believe these young observers, but the effect of this was to cultivate in her a rather cynical distaste for actual contact with the life they described—particularly on its emotional side. And so, though her home in New Orleans still remained, through her social connections, a gathering-place for a group of young men and women, they came and went marking only so many pleasant inconsequential incidents of a season. There were several young fellows who, it is true, pressed their attentions upon her a little more eagerly than others, but her retreat at the beginning of each summer to this mountain fastness always discouraged them. They preferred

to follow the pretty faces which led to the gayer resorts.

And yet Wilmer Howe was not without her attractions. As far as physical beauty goes she possessed a piquant charm of her own. She had as pretty a face as any of those who had pretty faces and not much else. Her brown eyes were like placid pools reflecting autumn foliage — the deep pools one finds in shaded places. Her mouth and nose and chin were modeled as a careful and sensitive artist might model them. If they were not as quickly responsive as the features of some of her friends, they perhaps inspired more confidence when they did respond. It meant something to rouse Wilmer Howe either to laughter or tears. Few had accomplished either, though many had made her smile and a few claimed to have seen her eyes dimmed. A handsome good-for-nothing from Georgia — later killed at Château-Thierry — had done more than that, but he never spoke of it. He kept it, to the end, a grave secret.

Allston was the first man ever presented to her without a well-filled-in background. He had done his best, since, to supply the deficiency by

casual mention of his mother and father and sister, even a few aunts and cousins for good measure, and an incidental reference to the ancestor who settled on the James. She never questioned any of his statements — except her father she had never met a more straightforward man or one whose ordinary speech she was so ready to accept at its full face value — but these people to whom he referred remained nothing more than shadows. They lacked all the sidelights that mutual friends throw upon such a group.

Not that she minded particularly. In a way it was rather refreshing. It left her free — utterly free — to discover the man for herself. Here he was, undeniably prepossessing, straight and tall, clear of eye, thin of face, bearing a faint resemblance physically and superficially to the lean mountain folk hereabouts. But he and they had chosen different roads a hundred years ago — perhaps a thousand years ago. A passing glance told her all she needed to know of a man like Bud Childers. A decade might never fully reveal a man like Allston.

And yet, at times, she felt as though she had made wonderful progress in even this brief period

of two weeks. She had come to like him. She had come to trust him. She had come to wait for him. And now to-night she had come to worry about him.

That, on the whole, was a bit absurd. She recognized as much herself. It rather vexed her. Of course her anxiety could be justified on general humanitarian grounds. She was not so cold-blooded but that any man in danger roused her sympathies. And this man was her guest. Moreover, she was indirectly responsible for having placed him in his present hazardous position. Clearly, then, there was nothing unnatural in the fact of her being more or less disturbed when he was two hours late.

More or less — upon the nice balance of those two words hung the fine distinction of whether her present agitation was normal or abnormal. A little more in one scale, a little less in the other, makes all the difference in the world. The trouble was that with her it was one moment a little more and the next a little less. The scales refused to remain stationary.

And her friend Galsworthy did not help her in the slightest. Rightfully he should have bade her

shrug her shoulders and go on with him. He should have said, in effect:

"Be sensible. This man is not anything in particular to you, and even if he is your guest there is nothing you can do to relieve his plight. He is only a figure in real life and you know you are not greatly concerned about such. They are merely shadows. Come with me and I will show you the substance—men who are men. I will reveal to you the raw, crude inwardness of men. You will be wiser—and safer."

But he failed her. To be sure, she refused to listen, but the fault still remained his. The function of the artist is to command attention.

At quarter past eleven she put down her book and moved restlessly about the room. Covertly her father watched her. There was an expression on her face he had never seen since she was a little girl—frank, unrestrained fear.

"There's a full moon and the chances are he is enjoying it," the father suggested.

She brushed aside the curtains and looked out. The grass was a stagy green; the trees like the trees of Maeterlinck. The driveway leading to the road was as clear as by daylight.

"The moon is full," she nodded. "That makes it easy to see."

But if it made it easy for Allston to see, it made it easy for Childers. One had the choice of getting comfort or added fear from that.

"Of course he may have strayed from the road," said Howe.

"It is possible, but not probable," decided Wilmer.

"Why do you say that?"

"He has told me about his night patrols in France."

"He had his maps and his instructions to help him there."

"Yes," she admitted. "That's true."

"Then —"

But at that moment Wilmer caught sight of a figure in the roadway. Only the slightest quickening of the movement of her nostrils revealed the jump her heart gave. She drew back a little so as not to be seen. Then she waited perhaps two breaths before saying:

"Here he comes now."

She recrossed the room to the table, resumed her seat, and picked up her book. It was here

Allston saw her when he came in. Howe had hurried to the door.

"Welcome back," the latter greeted the younger man heartily. "You gave us all a scare."

"I'm sorry. The night was so wonderful I took my time."

Wilmer looked up from her book with a smile. His presence was enough to throw her back into her usual calm. Her fears of a moment ago honestly now appeared ludicrous.

"You didn't meet with any adventures, then?"

"But I did," Allston smiled back. "I was the hero of a real bit of melodrama."

He sat down crossing his long legs comfortably.

Howe appeared concerned.

"You didn't meet Childers?"

"In full force," admitted Allston.

Then lightly and entertainingly he told the whole story. And yet not the whole story. As he talked, somehow Roxie did not stand out as prominently in his narrative as actually she did in the picture the episode had left in his own

mind. Rather deliberately he was slightly reticent about some details—insignificant enough in themselves—which had registered with unusual vividness in his own mind. He did this partly as a matter of personal taste and partly out of respectful deference to Roxie herself. He considered certain moments in the nature of private and confidential communications: for example, those few seconds after Bud's departure when Roxie, in gratitude, had stood there so silently in the moonlight, her face uplifted to his. He was sure she had been moved by nothing but girlish gratitude and had no conception of the astonishingly dramatic picture she made. Yet he never mentioned the incident. His conclusion from this point on was matter-of-fact enough.

"So I took her to the house and then came home—striking into the woods instead of keeping to the road."

"You were wise in that," said Howe.

"The trouble was I discovered my gun was empty," laughed Allston. "The last time I used it I popped away at some squirrels on the road. I'd already wasted the one shell I had on Bud and I was afraid a second bluff might not work."

"Good Lord!" gasped Howe. "Bluff *is* a dangerous game to play against that kind of man. You don't realize how recklessly they kill. They never reckon consequences."

"Well," said Allston, willing enough to forget the whole affair, "here I am back again, at any rate. I'm sorry if I've kept you up."

Wilmer rose.

"You must be tired after your long tramp. You'll let me make you a cup of coffee?"

"Please don't trouble," he pleaded.

No one had noticed the slight, tired-looking figure who had suddenly appeared at the door leading from the kitchen. Her cheeks were flushed after the stumbling journey she had taken at a run as long as her breath held out. Her hair was awry and her face stained where she had wiped away the perspiration with an earth-soiled hand. Below her eyes were other streaks — channels made by tears forced from her, not by maudlin grief, but sheer elemental anger because her feet would not carry her faster; the helpless rage of one baffled in an overwhelming effort.

"Roxie!" exclaimed Wilmer as she caught sight of the girl.

"Please, I'll git him his coffee," she panted.

CHAPTER VII

In a cane-bottomed chair beside the threshold of the post-office — a flimsy board building owing all its distinction, like a dirty uniform, to the magic influence of those two letters U.S. — sat Daddie Ingram during that social hour preceding the arrival of the mail. He himself owed much of his prestige to his association, as postmaster, with the Federal Government — that vast power which makes its influence felt even to the most remote hamlets. He had acquired a certain dignity because of his affiliation with the Eagle Itself.

The hot sun had made the roads which centered here dusty. Even the droning insects became half-hearted. Flies moved listlessly and became lazily indifferent to the danger of hostile hands moving against them with no spirit. Men slouched up to the weather-worn porch and sank down with a grunt, drawing their knees up and tilting their hats down. Some of them whittled, but none of them were sufficiently inspired to attempt any creative effort, unless perhaps a long

spindling toothpick sharpened with extreme care to a needle point.

Over his befogged spectacles, Daddie Ingram's faded blue eyes brightened a trifle as they observed the approach of Mr. Howe down the road. He spat and shifted his quid in order to be in readiness for a conversation which he had anticipated for several hours. He introduced his subject without preliminaries as soon as Howe was safely within range.

"Hear that young man up at yo' house had a sort of run-in with Bud Childers last night."

Howe was surprised — unpleasantly surprised. He had rather hoped the affair might not become current gossip. The moment this became public property it complicated matters a good deal.

"What did you hear?" questioned Howe without committing himself.

"Wull, I heard on two or three sides. Yes, suh, on two or three sides."

Pausing a moment he added, as though after mature reflection:

"I heard it on two or three sides."

"Childers been talking?"

"Ain't no one heard him doin' it," replied

Daddie cautiously. "Fust pusson I seen who knowed anything 'bout it was little Tom Culley. Said old Widder Kester giv' him the devil this mornin' for carryin' a lie 'bout her bein' sick. Tom said he told her who give him the message. Tom he went to Bud an' Bud was fightin' mad—all riled up about it. Then Tom 'lowed he was gonter cut up thet young man up to yo' house."

"Well?"

"Bud's bad," drawled Daddie Ingram. "Yessuh, he's bad. Yessuh, he's bad medicine. That young man up to yo' house might erve needed a gun and a good un."

Howe spoke deliberately now.

"Mr. Allston is just out of the army. He has a gun and he knows how to use it."

"Wull, he might erve needed a good un. Yessuh, he might erve."

"He will use it—if it's necessary. But he isn't looking for any trouble which is n't forced on him."

"Looks like an awful nice feller," admitted Daddie. "That clever an' friendly. I'm powerful glad he's got a gun. Better carry it, too."

Turge Calhoun, a dwarfed, fleshless little man

who looked as though he had been long hung upon a nail to dry, looked up with interest. Then he broke out into uncanny laughter — a piercing falsetto.

"Turge — he knows Bud," nodded Ingram phlegmatically.

Howe attended to his business inside and went back home frankly disturbed. It was clear enough that this group, while not actually hostile to Allston, looked forward with considerable pleasant anticipation to a second run-in between him and Bud. They intended to go even further — as far as it was possible by innuendo and goading they would spur Bud on. There was both amusement and excitement in the situation — just as in a cock or a dog fight. They were no more apt to consider consequences than Bud was — less, in view of the fact that they themselves were not in danger.

Anxious as Howe was, he felt quite helpless. He knew there was no authority of the law he could invoke. Officers are powerless until after a crime is committed. Moreover, it is doubtful if he would find local officials sympathetic, anyway. It was even more doubtful if he himself

was in sympathy with any such method of procedure. Difficulties of this nature could not be settled by law. Allston would be the last man in the world to listen to such a proposal.

Obviously the simplest way out, if it could be managed, would be to place the two men beyond reach of one another. But it was as much out of the question to think of shifting Bud Childers as it was Green Mountain or Big Laurel Cove or Caterpillar Ridge. As for moving Allston out of danger, it seemed equally impossible except by resorting to some ruse. This course was as distinctly against Howe's own nature as he knew it would be against that of his guest.

Howe did not repeat his conversation with Daddie Ingram either to his daughter or to Allston. To do so would be only to frighten the former and rouse, possibly to aggressive action, the latter. But he did persuade Allston to keep his automatic always in his pocket and to make sure it was loaded.

"Don't pop away at any more squirrels," he warned. "If you do, reload. You 'll need a full hand the next time you call that man."

Allston heeded the advice, although even now

he was by no means convinced that any such precaution was necessary. However, he had toted a gun so much during the past two years that he found it no great burden and this was an easy way to please his host. And Allston was anxious, in every way, to please him. He felt, each day, under a greater obligation. He had prolonged his visit with these amiable people far beyond the limits the happy chance of his accidental introduction to them warranted. And yet he stayed on, for every time he suggested that he was straining his welcome he was met by such a genuine protest from both father and daughter that he found it easy to drift back into inaction.

This countryside was to his taste. He liked the contrast of rugged hills with fertile valley; of the primeval mountain growth of huge chestnut-oaks and laurel, with the luxuriant rhododendrons, tropical in their leafy richness; of the cold streams and rough roads with the formal orderliness of this well-kept summer place. He sensed something of this dramatic contrast in these people who had come so unexpectedly into his life. Bud and Roxie set against Howe and Wilmer heightened his interest in both. They stood for

two different periods. And yet for all he knew the difference between them might not be as great as it seemed.

That was the striking fact against which he was continually bumping during the war; the amazing likeness of peoples he had always considered so essentially different, and the amazing differences between those he thought identical. This held true even of different civilizations. It held true of different historical epochs. The past and the present were all jumbled together over there just as the dead and the living were. It was sometimes difficult to distinguish one from the other. And they were easily interchangeable. He remembered with particular vividness an old French town in which he had been billeted—a town dating back, not years like towns at home, but centuries. If anything might be thought to be deep-rooted and fixed in its associations with the past, it was this stone village, gray and heavy with age. And yet in a night Allston had seen a rude interruption of its traditions. The inhabitants had been hurried away to escape heavy gunfire when he and a few other officers entered the silent streets. Only the empty shell of this an-

cient town remained. Yet doors were open, tables set, beds in order. Even the old town clock was going. It made him jump when it struck out with leisurely resonance and indifferent concern each passing hour. But the population, boasting kinship back to Cæsar, had vanished in a day to give place to a few sprightly young officers bred in a country which three hundred years before had been savage. These soldier cubs ate at the time-stained tables, slept in the hallowed beds, while the night stars looked down undisturbed.

It was not easy after this for Allston to believe that centuries counted for much towards stability. It was still more difficult when a little later he saw varying breeds of men tearing at each other's throats like jungle beasts. He was one of them and tore as hard as any. And then—presto—this was over and the breeds became polite and civilized again, and the ancient townsfolk returned to their abodes and remade their beds and reset their tables and sent Allston and the others—such of them as were not buried with the dead centurions—back to their own young land.

An experience like this made a man cautious about fixing boundaries either of time or space. It drove a man back of history to a primitive brotherhood which discovered men and women, of whatever clime and of whatever period, to be much alike.

And yet he was inclined even now to make an exception of Wilmer. It was difficult for him to conceive any set of circumstances which could affect the cultivated poise of her calm nature or disturb to any extent her steady control based upon a fine intelligence. It amused him to imagine how she would have acted under the conditions existing in that little French town so suddenly shaken from its venerable security. He could not picture her then as any other than she was now. She would have remained had that been possible. If not she would have walked out calmly, looking upon the interruption as an ugly interlude, but quite unchanged by it. But she would be beautiful, with a sort of saintly beauty, both in going and returning.

In many ways this steadiness, this assurance, this complete confidence in herself, the product of a ripe development a little beyond her years,

appealed strongly to him. She stood out in his lately troubled world like the North star over a stormy sea. He welcomed her because she seemed to guide him back to that snug harbor in which he had ridden so safely at anchor beneath a golden sun and an azure sky until the war bade him set sail. In her presence he was able to dream pleasantly and lazily again as he had in college. And rather sentimentally too. This was an agreeable surprise. He thought all that had been burned out of him. During those few days at home he had been astonished at how unresponsive he had been to the pretty young faces about him. But they had chattered about the war and his nerves had been more jumpy than they now were.

He had steadied down a lot since then. He could thank Wilmer's deep brown eyes for that — and her soft, musical voice, never raised, but clear and distinct as a silver bell. He liked to listen to it in the evening as she read aloud to her father, though often he found himself hearing nothing but the voice. He was quite sure that if interested in the text he would do much better to read to himself. But he seldom was interested. He

much preferred talking with her when she had no book in her hand.

He much preferred talking to her about — almost nothing at all. She was a good walker, and they used to start on long tramps through the woods for the neighboring hills. Always it was to some definite point like Caterpillar Ridge. Never on these hikes did they succeed in reaching their objective. Allston, at times, felt rather mean about that because it seemed to disturb her. And it obliged him to adopt the rather underhanded expedient of allowing her to believe that the bit of gas he had once inhaled was responsible for his weakness, when, as a matter of fact, it was nothing but the joy of sprawling out lazily at her feet. He had never felt better in his life and he knew it.

He used to pick out the sunny places — tiny coves lying like pockets or mountain nests at the foot of bold rocks. If he could find one near a brook, so much the better, for this gave him the excuse of fishing while the rippling tinkle of the falling water sang with her a duet. It is not on record that he brought home any fish, but this was of minor importance. Your true sportsman never fishes for the sake of fish.

But always he brought home something—if only the memory of a dimpling smile caught unexpectedly in response to some bit of fooling. He liked to make her smile unexpectedly. It was like angling in an untried brook. Her eyes were the pools—so deep that one could not see bottom. And like mountain pools continually filling with fresh water, her thoughts ran through them. One could never tell when a smile, like a quick trout, might flash into them from somewhere, and jump at his bait. That was worth waiting for.

So they sat one afternoon just off the road leading to Big Laurel Cove—not knowing except in a general way where they were. It would not have mattered greatly to Allston had he realized he was within a short distance of Bud Childers's shack. As far as he was concerned at this time Bud Childers did not exist.

CHAPTER VIII

Bud Childers, however, did exist. He existed more intensely than ever. From the moment he met Allston and Roxie together he had burned like a man with a fever.

It was a dangerous fever — a fever bred of baffled desire, of jealousy, of hate. Since he had been old enough to stand on his two feet and fight back, he had never been bullied as Allston had bullied him. Always he had been able to leave his mark even if meeting defeat in the end. But in the last ten years he had never until now met defeat.

To this humiliating reversal Allston had added the insult of humbling him before Roxie. How Bud ever found his way back to Big Laurel Cove that night he never knew, for if ever a man was blind with rage it was he; literally blind. He saw nothing of the rocky road over which he traveled, but he took it at a gallop, cursing the mare and digging his heels into her sides whenever she paused. He turned her into the barn all dripping with lather as she was and never re-

moved her saddle. Then he stumbled to his house and locked himself in.

He had not waited for Allston that evening nor attempted to trail him home. He knew better than that. He must see straight and have a steady hand when he met the man again. In the condition he was then in he could not have been sure of his aim at ten feet. And he meant to be sure — next time.

But the process of calming down was no simple one. Hour after hour he paced his cabin floor until finally, exhausted, he tumbled into a heap on his bed and slept. When he awoke it was the same thing all over again. And yet slowly, out of this jumble of emotions, two finally detached themselves or perhaps absorbed the others; hate — black hate — of this man Allston, and love — fire-like love — of Roxie Kester.

Or perhaps his passion resolved itself, in the final analysis, into the single passion of love. For Love is the mother of every passion, and mother-like shelters all her brood, even those which turn against her and eat away at her heart. A man may hate beyond the possibility of loving, but a man may love and yet hate at one and the same time.

If Bud had desired Roxie before, he desired her with a fervor a hundred times as strong now. There were moments when she drove every other desire out of his head and heart—even all thought of Allston. Whenever he was able to let himself go utterly, she washed away even those crimson spots that danced before his eyes. It was then as though just he and she were alone in the world. Yet they knew not loneliness. Two only they might be out of hundreds of millions, but it was the hundreds of millions who were alone, not they. Because they would be up here on this mountain-side where the trees were many and friendly, where the birds and squirrels would be their playmates by day; where, by night, the stars and planets would be their fellows. Bud was never as definite as that, but something of the sort he sensed whenever he thought of her. She was more one with such things than she was with folk—even as he was. He had always been able to get along up here. The trees and the denizens among them had never interfered with him. Forest creatures let a man alone. And he, in his way, had always been kind to them. He had a feel for them. Animals were not afraid of him, though

often enough he lost his temper and abused them, and, when necessary, killed them without emotion. But he spent weeks nursing an injured chicken back to health and kept an old gray horse for years after she was quite useless. No dog had ever come to his shack for food and gone away hungry, though many a man had done so.

Bud had a notion that it was not man who was basic, but Nature. This new love of his — for it was new, a development of his initial desire — was one with Nature. It had to do with elemental things. Had he been religious he might have said it had to do with God. But after that, to have been consistent, he would have had to say this black hate had to do with the Devil.

He might not have been far wrong at that. Whenever it pounced upon him he was like one possessed. It bred murder in his heart — the lust to kill. A dozen times his eyes had burned with evil satisfaction at the picture of Allston in his death agonies. He had heard the bark of his own pistol and seen the man crumple up, falling to this side and that, his eyes rolling, his face writhing with pain. Leeringly he had looked on, watching to the last gasp.

Only one thing had stayed his hand as long as this. He wanted Allston to die, but he himself wanted to live. Never before had he considered himself when in such a mood. He had always moved recklessly. This new element made him move cautiously. To die would be to lose Roxie in another way. To have her, he must live. He needed years to satisfy himself with her. He might need years to satisfy her with him.

Life — the ability to see, hear, and feel her — he must retain. He must not jeopardize a second of it. When he shot, it must be from ambush with no traces left. He must await his opportunity — perhaps contrive it.

The opportunity came sooner than he expected and with no contriving. It came one afternoon when in descending the mountain road, his keen nostrils caught a new scent in the still air. It was tobacco smoke, but not of his kind. It was neither plug nor Bull Durham, but something more pungent. He had caught the same spicy aroma once or twice when the summerers were loafing around the post-office waiting for the mail — the men in white flannels and immaculate shirts. It was the kind that only pink-cheeked strangers smoked.

Bud stiffened like a pointing bird dog. He stood so, listening, for almost a full minute. He regulated even his breathing. Then slowly he moved his hand back to his big-calibred revolver until his fingers gripped the handle. The feel of it calmed his twitching muscles.

A light breeze coming out of the woods on his left, where a branch of the stream which ran by his shack had its source, gave him his direction. He knew every foot of those woods as he did for miles around his place. He knew even the little cove where a man would be likely to stop to rest.

Carefully Bud moved one foot, looking to see where to rest it, lest a crackling twig give warning. So step by step he made his way among the trees — taking a half-hour to go a few hundred yards. But when, through the branches, he made out clearly the form of Allston sitting on the ground, he felt the time well spent — even though, to his surprise, he discovered that the man was not alone. He saw red for a second as he caught sight of a woman's skirt. Then, as he discerned who the other was, he steadied. There was only one woman in the world who had the power to stay his fingers on the trigger. And that one was not Wilmer Howe.

CHAPTER IX

For a few moments Bud Childers, safely hidden in the undergrowth, studied Allston as he sat within a few feet of Wilmer Howe in that sunlit cove on the side of Green Mountain. His long, bony fingers grasped firmly the gun with which he meant to kill this man. He had awaited his opportunity and here it was. He would have gambled a hundred to one that no power on earth could swerve him from his purpose, for it was backed by deadly hatred and jealousy and the burning hunger for revenge for the deep humiliation he had been made to suffer before the woman he loved. It was possible, from his present strategic point, to shoot and vanish. His guilt might be suspected afterwards, but no one could definitely establish it. There were other men in these mountains besides himself ready enough to shoot at strangers when they wandered loosely among the coves. Too many hidden stills existed hereabouts to make outsiders welcome.

Bud's face flushed as he watched Allston take leisurely puffs of the Turkish cigarette he held in

his white fingers. And his lip curled in scorn as he noted the belted Norfolk jacket, the golf trousers and long stockings, the shiny, low shoes — all marks to him of effeminacy. But the smooth-shaven face, with its clear pink skin showing through the slight tan, seemed to irritate him more than anything else. His own was dark and tough as leather. So should every man's be who was a man.

It was to this fellow Bud had seen Roxie cling in the moonlit road. How much she meant by it he did not know, but she had meant enough so that she had turned away from him on the very night he intended to claim her. She had turned away from her own kind to a stranger because of his store clothes and his lily-white fingers and his pink cheeks and his school-taught way of speaking. She liked 'um that way. He had taunted her with that and she made no reply.

Bud raised his gun with care not to disturb as much as a twig. He did not dare wait longer, for the sight of the man and the ugly memories he brought fresh to mind revived the old fever that blinded his eyes and unsteadied his hand. Blood-red anger does not make for sure shooting. And

yet he must not hurry. He could not afford to risk more than one shot and he must not merely wound. To leave Allston crippled would be worse than nothing. That would excite only sympathy without definitely ending the affair. So he took his time.

Bud's finger muscles had actually begun to press against the heavy trigger, his bead drawn fair on Allston's heart, when he saw something that made him pause. It was a simple act; Allston suddenly tossed aside his cigarette and seized the girl's hand. Bud could not catch the man's words, but he saw Wilmer Howe spring to her feet. He saw Allston rise beside her.

Bud still had a good target — an even better target than before. And yet his gun began to lower. This situation interested him. He could catch Allston's words now.

"Oh, I 'm sorry, Wilmer," he exclaimed. "But your hand was so near."

Her face was scarlet.

"I did n't expect that sort of thing from you," she answered, avoiding his eyes.

"I did n't expect it of myself," he said. "Honest, I did n't. I — I lost my head for a moment."

"That is just what I didn't expect."

"I can't explain it any further," he confessed.

"It 's the sort of thing that can't be explained," she replied.

There was no quaver in her voice — only a note of deep regret.

"And yet," went on Allston, passing his hand over his eyes — "and yet there was something. It was almost — almost as though I were in danger. Your fingers were near and I seized them. That sounds absurd, does n't it?"

"Yes," she answered steadily, "it does."

"Perhaps I 'm more used to absurd things than you," he went on with a worried smile. "They were always happening — over there."

"That sort?" she questioned.

"All sorts. You never knew. You just acted without knowing why."

"It 's a rather dangerous way, is n't it?"

"Yes."

"And it does n't make it easy for a woman to trust a man who — who acts in that way, does it?"

"No."

"Then — perhaps we had best be going."

"I've hurt you as deeply as that?" he exclaimed.

She started forward a step. Again Bud raised his gun and covered his man. And yet, even as he did so, he felt that here was a new development which he ought to consider. If he had time, he would consider it. If this man was sweet on Wilmer Howe, it eliminated him more effectively from Roxie's life than his death would do. And this without the margin of danger that was bound to follow any shooting.

Allston hurried to her side with a cry that made the girl pause.

"Wilmer," he said huskily, "Wilmer, if — if you go like this I can never forgive myself. I've acted like a cad, but you must show that you trust me again."

"How can I do that?"

"Come back and sit down where you were. That's all I ask. Sit here a little while longer with me and then — and then we'll go back home and I'll pack my bag."

She met his eyes at that.

"You mean —?"

"I've overstayed in the Garden of Eden — by one day," he answered.

"But dad—what will dad think?"

"You 're going to make it hard for me to face your father if you leave me with the feeling I 've abused his generous hospitality."

"I don't want you to feel like that," she protested.

"Then—"

Her face grew even more scarlet as she slowly moved back to the flat rock upon which she had been seated. Allston again took his place at her feet. Again Bud released the grip on his gun.

There was much here he did not understand; there was something here he did—even better than Allston. It was clear to him that the pink-cheeked fool had some one now in whom he was more interested than in Roxie. If he went to Roxie and told her this—reported how he had seen Allston hold Wilmer Howe's hand and heard him speaking his school-taught talk to her up here alone in the cove—she might change her mind about this stranger. If he knew Roxie she would turn against the man as quickly as she had turned to him. She would hate him with as black a hate as he did. She would see him as he was.

Bud was not much given to diplomacy nor to

much fine reasoning, but here was a suggestion that appealed to him. It was based first of all upon the idea of self-protection which in turn went back to his newfound zest in life. He wanted to live and he did not mean to take any unnecessary chances. With everything in his favor, a man who has killed is not in as secure a position as a man who has not killed. There is always the danger that something unforeseen may happen. The officers had rounded up Roge Enfield after he knifed Pete Calhoun in spite of every effort made to protect him.

Allston might get out of this country at once as he had hinted to Wilmer Howe, or he might stay long enough to marry this woman. He'd be going, anyhow, before winter. And either way he'd be leaving Roxie forever. He'd be leaving Roxie just as soon as Bud could get word to her of what he had seen.

Bud lowered his gun. It was too bad to miss a dead-sure thing like this, but the new plan was worth trying. If it was not as satisfactory in many ways as shooting, it was safer.

When Bud took his first careful step back through the bushes, it marked a significant stage

in his development. For the first time in his life he had allowed Reason to dictate to passion. His impulse still was to kill. In not obeying it he was making a real personal sacrifice. And though fundamentally he was governed by selfish motives — perhaps reason makes for selfishness — he was also allowing the interests of another to play a part in his decision. However indirectly, he was considering Roxie to a degree. If his chief concern was with the happiness she would bring him, he was also honestly convinced that it was within his power to bring happiness to her. He was going to allow her to go to the village and buy whatever she wished — calico for dresses, ribbons for her hair, candy and everything. Within a week he had got his eye on another horse that would be good for her to ride. And he was going to wipe his feet whenever he came into the house. And wash his hands if she insisted upon it. All those hopes contributed towards his desire to live — made him willing to give up his desire to kill when this conflicted with those other interests.

Step by step Bud felt his way back to the road. And then, walking free and easy, undisturbed now by the noise of his firm feet crunching twig

and rock, he returned to his shack on Big Laurel. He went about his farm work whistling. It was something of a relief not to care who heard him.

CHAPTER X

For centuries philosophers have attempted to disentangle dreams from reality and to fix definite boundaries between the two. They have not found it easy. It is doubtful whether, even if possible, this would prove worth while except for the satisfaction it would bring the philosophers. Probably when the latter are all done with their grave conclusions people will continue to mix the two agreeably to their own lives.

If deep-browed academicians have found the task of separation difficult, certainly Roxie Kester cannot be blamed if she did not succeed and so kept right on with her dreaming. Particularly after that wonderful evening when Allston stood by her side like a veritable knight of old. For he had seemed to her then nothing short of magnificent. And yet, unlike most magnificent things in her life — such as story-book heroes and angels and gallant men of whom she read in the papers during the war — not remote. He had been near enough to touch. He *had* touched her; had held her hands for a moment. How the stars had swam

before her then! How close, at that moment, her dreams had seemed to reality. She had been ready to give herself up to them utterly. She had been ready to give herself up to him had he but asked or, not even asking, had taken. A little later, recalling her emotion, she had grown big-eyed, but she did not deny the fact. She had been quite helpless. And she was not ashamed of it. He had fought for her, twice risked his life for her, and she was his if he wished. Not that she had any very definite idea of what that meant. Few of her ideas were definite. They were scarcely more than instincts, warning her here and urging her on there, but always proving themselves sound and sweet and true.

Roxie thought of love as she thought of Heaven —a condition of complete happiness necessarily obscure until actually experienced. It was quite detached from marriage, or marriage, at any rate, as she saw it exemplified in the lives about her. Here it meant housekeeping and scarcely anything more than housekeeping. Marriage marked the end of youth; the beginning of old age. It was a serious, more or less matter-of-fact estate into which women entered, not because they

wished, but because it was inevitable. It was what Bud Childers had proposed for her. It was what, for the time being at any rate, Allston had saved her from.

Love was something entirely different; as different as poetry from prose; as different as dreams from reality. It even turned prose into poetry and reality into dreams. It glorified everything like spring. It made flowers grow beneath her feet; made the birds break forth into song when she walked abroad; it deepened the blue of the sky and burnished the gold of the sun; it put her in touch everywhere with the beautiful. It even brought out the beauty in her own face and figure.

Roxie was not vain, although she knew well enough she compared favorably with other girls in the village. But lately, when standing before the mirror while doing her hair for the night, she had looked at herself a little more critically. And with a thrill of pride she had not discovered much with which to find fault. Her light hair was long and silken and responded with an added sheen to the careful combing she now gave it. Her blue eyes stared back at her with a new light which

quickened them. Her skin was clear and though slightly more tanned than Miss Wilmer's had a creamy bloom the latter lacked. Her nose and mouth and chin were not much and yet not badly modeled. Her teeth were large and not as pearly white as Miss Wilmer's, but they were strong and, ever since the teacher at school had taught her to use a toothbrush, had improved. Her body was lithe and firm, but she did not think much about that. Except, she could not help but notice, she looked her best when in her long white night-robe which gave her full freedom and revealed the fine curves of her neck and her slight, rounded arms. She blushed even as she noted this and was glad enough to blow out her lamp and shelter herself in the dark.

She awoke every morning as fresh and clear-visioned as the dawn. She awoke with the physical vigor of a young animal ready to frolic and with her eyes wide open. She dressed as quickly as a boy and went down to her tasks with a song in her heart. For she was kindling the morning fire, not for Miss Wilmer, but for Allston. She threw open windows to let in the cool, fragrant new air, not for her mistress, but for him. For

him she started the kettle to boiling and for him mixed her batter for hot bread. This was his house. He was the host and the others guests.

At odd times he stepped into the kitchen to say Hello. That was something to look forward to and later to remember. She made it a point always to be wearing a clean gingham apron.

"Do you know," he said to her, dropping in just before supper, "you look as though you grew in the field like the daisies and some one plucked you fresh every day. You sure that is n't true?"

She shook her head.

"Flowers are pretty, but they don't last long," she said.

"And yet they are everywhere. They were even in France — on the battle-fields."

Roxie often carried Allston's thoughts back to those days by suggestions of one kind and another. And he never resented this. She never made him feel that he was recalling past events for the entertainment of an outsider. It was more as though she helped him live over again the pleasanter details. She accepted them as he had done at the time, simply and naïvely.

"But I don't know if it's any stranger to find them in France than in my room every day," he went on with a smile. "How do they get on my table?"

"I put them there," she answered directly. "Don't you like them?"

"Very much. It's mighty kind of you, Roxie. About this time, three years back, there was a lady in France who used to do that for me."

She looked up quickly.

"A girl?" she asked.

"A lady — a very old lady."

"Oh."

"But the flowers were young. Flowers are always young, aren't they?"

"Until they die."

"Who knows? They may be young after that."

"Maybe," she nodded seriously.

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen. How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

"Seems like you was younger."

"Is that very old, Roxie?"

"No, sir, that ain't very old," she hastened to assure him, fearing she had offended. "No, sir,

only seems like I'd be old when I was twenty-four."

"I doubt it — if you keep growing in the field. You'll come up every spring."

"Seems sometimes like it was spring always."

"What?" he questioned. "That sounds as though you were in love."

Her cheeks flamed scarlet at that. He noticed it before she could turn. He studied her pretty back as she bent her head over her work and the curve of her neck where the soft hair grows.

"Roxie," he said without moving, in a lowered voice, "is love like that?"

"I dunno," she answered weakly.

He scarcely heard her reply. His thoughts this time had gone back, not to France, but to a tiny sunlit cove on the mountain-side; to the impulsive clasp of a warm hand which had left him worried ever since.

"It might be like that," he said. "That 's what the poets are always singing, is n't it?"

"I dunno," she repeated.

He roused himself.

"I don't know either," he said. "But perhaps some day we may find out — both of us. It sounds reasonable, anyhow."

He went out leaving Roxie alone with her burning thoughts while he reviewed his own.

It would seem that with all that has been written about love by both philosophers and romanticists; with all the lovers there have been in the world since the world began who have recorded their experiences in song and story and memoirs; with all that a man sees and hears of love with his own ears and his own eyes before he has reached twenty, there should be little chance left for speculation on the part of any one. And yet here was Allston, who had read a good bit and had seen a good bit, unable to recognize it either in himself or in others. It was as though he found himself in some newly discovered land about which he must feel his way cautiously lest he lose his direction. It was as though he were upon some untried venture.

He had, of course, a sentimental notion of what love meant, but this did not seem to the point. It was not that which had made him reach for Wilmer's hand. He had said at the time he could not explain his act, and that was true. His impulse had come from deep within. But stranger than this was the effect this brief contact pro-

duced in him. The effrontery of it, which had at first startled them both, she seemed ready to forgive, and this, in turn, allowed him to forget that crass feature. But this by no means settled the matter. Their relations were not what they had been before. He saw this in her eyes suddenly grown timid; he felt it in his own changed attitude when with her.

She had become, he would have said, more human. Until now she had been no more than an intellectual pastime, like a pleasant and not too baffling problem in chess. He had enjoyed moving this way and that in order to see how she would respond. When he made her smile, he felt that he had scored Check, although more often than not she moved easily out of danger. This seemed like an amusing and safe diversion for them both. With nothing at stake it mattered little who won.

But the touch of her warm fingers — brief as it was — had proved her of flesh and blood. It seemed strange after this that he had ever doubted it. On the walk home from the cove that late afternoon he was conscious of it every minute. He saw her try to resume the old game at the point where it had been so rudely interrupted

and saw her fail, though he did his best to help her. He himself tried and failed. For long intervals they walked in silence — a dangerous silence.

That evening she came down to supper lightheartedly enough and in a pretty new gown. For the first time since his stay here Allston could have told with some detail just what she wore. It was a light, gauzy thing of a bluish tint with rosebuds peeping out from the skirt beneath. Her hair was done high and fastened with a large tortoise-shell comb. The walk had so crimsoned her cheeks that her father noticed it.

"You're looking very fine to-night," he said.

"Thank you, dad," she answered.

Allston wished to add his testimony, but when he met her brown eyes he decided not to venture. But at that he honestly did think she looked very fine.

Howe appeared troubled with Allston's lack of success in the neighboring streams. He had recommended them — on hearsay evidence, to be sure — and held himself more or less responsible.

"It's odd you don't have better luck," he said at supper. "I've always understood the fishing around here was excellent — particularly for bass."

"It is," answered Allston. "But I've been fishing for trout."

"Well, it seems as though you ought to get a trout occasionally."

"I'm afraid it's been my fault," broke in Wilmer. "I think Mr. Allston will have to try his luck alone for a while."

"I might get more fish," admitted Allston. "But I wouldn't have as much pleasure."

"Trout are wary," said Howe.

"As wary as smiles," admitted Allston.

"I did more or less fishing when a boy," ran on Howe. "The streams were better stocked then."

"But the woods were not any sweeter nor the sun any brighter," suggested Allston. "And that after all is what counts. I haven't a complaint to make—unless it is of to-day."

"Why of to-day?" questioned Howe.

"I didn't give enough attention to my fishing."

"And lost a big one? They always bite best when your head is turned."

"My head *was* turned," replied Allston, looking across the table at Wilmer. She was very busy at that moment pouring tea.

"You will have sugar to-night?"

"All you 'll give me."

"That 's too bad," Howe consoled him. "I hope you 'll have better luck next time."

"I shall certainly try to keep my head another time," declared Allston.

It was not easy, however, even for the remainder of that evening. He had never before minded the presence of her father, but from this point on he found himself contriving all sorts of little subterfuges for isolating her. She managed to foil them all without permitting him to know whether it was deliberate or not. To-night she consumed at least two hours in reading the New Orleans papers until he heartily wished that New Orleans could be blotted from the map. And yet, had it not been for the papers and those droning market quotations on sugar, the chances are that Howe would not have impolitely closed his dear old eyes and gone off peacefully to sleep. The girl herself did not notice until Allston rose and touched her shoulder, pointing at the dozing figure.

"Let's go out on the porch," he whispered. "We must n't disturb him."

She hesitated — evidently uneasy.

"You don't want to wake him, do you? You know he hasn't been sleeping very well lately."

Which was true enough.

Reluctantly she rose and yet with a curious sort of reluctance too; a reluctance that expressed itself in a choking kind of eagerness. Out there he faced her in the light of a waning moon.

"You didn't mean what you said about letting me fish alone?" he demanded.

"It — it might be best," she answered.

"It would be like sending me into exile, and you don't want to do that, do you?"

"I don't know," she answered with almost the bewilderment of a child. "Oh, I don't know anything."

It was strange that her phrase should have recalled to him the half-heard phrase Roxie had used. The latter had said, "I dunno" in answer to the question he had asked, carelessly enough, of her.

"Everything seems to be getting down to that," he muttered. "I don't know very much myself."

CHAPTER XI

It was not often that Wilmer remained long awake after retiring to her room. Her days came to a calm and untroubled close with the first approach of drowsiness. The problems which claimed her attention were either of that minor daylight character familiar to all housekeepers or else of so purely an academic nature—being largely those offered by the younger British novelists—that they were as easily laid aside at night as her walking boots.

But this evening, instead of hurrying into bed after blowing out her light, she slipped on a dainty negligee and sat by the open window. She enjoyed the feel of the fresh night breeze on her white forehead and warm face. The moon had already lost one section of its brilliant circumference, but enough was left to bathe in a translucent glow the encircling hills which shut in the sleeping valley covered now with a silver veil. A cluster of chestnut-oaks stood below her window slightly to the left of the porch. Fleeting bits of light sifted through the luxuriant foliage like

drops of silver rain. The scene before her eyes was both clear and vague; many bits easily recognizable, but the rest complicated with full-bodied shadows. She knew every inch of it, and yet it was veiled in mystery. Knowing there was nothing to fear, still she would have been afraid to walk abroad alone. She would not trust her intelligence to keep in leash her imagination. And yet if her intellect could not do that for her, it was serving her ill.

It was—in other ways. Reason should have told her she was making too much of the incident of the afternoon. To treat that seriously was to make too much of Allston himself. And this was dangerous. It destroyed perspective and cloaked the man in mystery—as the night light did the familiar acres and trees before her. This left her the prey to all sorts of illusions—to all sorts of unwarranted timidities. It took her back to childhood and virginal ignorance. This, after her reading had turned the searchlight upon one shadow after another revealing the stark truth.

The stark truth was sometimes unpleasant; sometimes tediously innocuous. Never was it romantic. Most men, it seems, were the slaves of

fleeting passions; most women, their victims. This ended sometimes in tragedy; sometimes in comedy; sometimes in nothing at all. The greatest tragedy to her was when it ended in nothing at all. She had an orderly mind and liked to reach definite conclusions. She found vagueness depressing.

Yet that appeared to be the spirit of the day. No one knew anything with certainty whether of politics or religion or human nature. She herself had clung persistently to most of the doctrines of her father in politics and religion, and found them adequate. But she could not accept his trusting confidence in the inherent honesty of men, except those of his generation. The world was simpler in his day.

She had liked Allston from the start and been willing to accept him, up to a certain point, at his face value. She never expected to go beyond that point. As long as she viewed him merely objectively, she found him distinctly entertaining and a decided addition to her list of friends. Considering the circumstances of his introduction to the household, she was warranted in believing that here their relations would end. It was on this

theory she had allowed herself so much freedom with him.

Now this was all changed. He had thrust himself upon her attention in another fashion. When he seized her hand, the act, in itself, was trivial enough, as he had argued. But what it connoted was not trivial. And the effect it produced on her was not trivial. The blood which rushed to her face was not in protest at his boldness, even though for self-protection she had been obliged to make him think so. In reality it was a startling confession of weakness in herself. Had she been coldly indifferent or even righteously indignant, she could have forgotten the incident. But she could not forget the surge of a far different emotion that had swept through her.

She had handled herself well considering the strength and unexpectedness of this attack. The carefully erected barriers of years had been swept away. She had found herself standing, self-dependent, facing this man in the grip of a passion so primitive it shocked her. She had been thrilled by the clasp of his strong fingers. For a few dizzy seconds she was merely some captured thing glad of her capture. Had she obeyed her

desires, she would not have struggled at all — would neither have withdrawn her hand nor chided him.

Wilmer faced the truth mercilessly. She made no attempt to equivocate or to excuse herself, though even here in the privacy of her room her cheeks flamed scarlet once again. She had been governed by instincts as primitive as anything she might expect of Roxie and she knew it. To be sure, she had conquered them. In the space of half a dozen frantic heartbeats she had mastered herself. But this did not blot out those other few seconds.

And now to explain it — and she must explain it to maintain her self-respect — she was driven to the use of the word love; the word she prided herself on being able to regard with almost cynical scorn. It was not like this that she had expected love to come, if ever it did come into her life. If she was not yet twenty-five, she was no longer seventeen. She was supposed to be sufficiently well disciplined to analyze even this passion intelligently. If not, all her reading and thought were to little purpose. The first appeal of a lover to her should be through intellect and character, not through the emotions.

It was some consolation to be able to admit that she could offer no criticism of Allston's character as far as it had been revealed to her. As for his intellect, if it was not as acutely active as her ideal called for, it was by no means negative. She might have been satisfied with it—if only it mattered. But it did not.

She had not this afternoon, and she did not now, care a picayune about his intellect. It was the beat of his pulse against her hand which had swayed her. It was the feel of being in his possession that had taken away her breath. It was the magic of his eyes seeking her eyes with an insistence almost brutal which had swept her off her feet.

It was all those things which at this moment brought into her eyes something of the mystery which the moon brought to the familiar picture at which in awe she now gazed from her window. Her lips parted and she pronounced his name—using quite unconsciously, because it expressed a tenderness her mood demanded, a nickname she associated with a brother who had died very young.

"Ned," she repeated to herself.

The sound of the whispered name brought the man into such vivid being that it was as though he stood beside her. She shrank away from the window. She stared about the room in fear lest her boldness had actually materialized him. Hurriedly she threw off her negligee and running to the bed hid herself beneath the sheets.

CHAPTER XII

A RAIN lasting three days delayed Bud Childers. But with the cards he now held he could afford to wait. Moreover, he found himself interested in a new occupation. He could use this time to advantage in preparing the shack for his prospective bride.

It is doubtful if any woman in the world save Roxie could have roused in him such an ambition. This log house, substantially as it stood to-day, had been adequate for him, for his father, for his father's father, and all the women who incidentally had lived here. He was ready to maintain that it was good enough for any one — except Roxie. It was essentially good enough for her. But living with the Howes had made her fussy. And she was a little different, anyway. She liked purty things and clean things.

The building was a one-story affair made of hewn trees with the bark on. In the course of time much of this had fallen off leaving the bare wood now weatherbeaten, showing a dull grayish brown. A flimsy porch stood before it,

the roof supported by posts of young chestnut-oaks. A board door opened into the main living-room. This was finished roughly with planed boards, but made rather attractive by a stone fireplace blackened by the smoke from countless fires. Here Bud did most of his cooking, though a room in the rear was intended to be a kitchen. Near the dog-irons stood a black tin coffee-pot, and on the mantel above were various earthen crocks which had served as cooking-utensils for three generations. A few cane-bottomed straight-back chairs, a table covered with cracked oilcloth, a small stove in the corner, the pipe braced with rusted wires, a rifle and a long-barreled shotgun fastened to the walls, a lithograph torn from an old patent-medicine calendar representing dimly an elderly couple peacefully paring fruit, were the only furnishings. On the wall to the right of the fireplace two doors indicated a cupboard. To the rear, back of this room, was the bedroom containing a four-poster rope bed covered with somewhat frayed and none too clean crazy-quilts above gray blankets. Outside, to the left, and sheltered by the eaves stood the spring-house supplied with the clearest of mountain water.

Bud's original idea was merely to sweep, but having done that much he went a little farther and applied hot water and soap to the floors, the furniture, and finally to the odds and ends of dishes. This not only filled in the spare time left from his farm duties, but it satisfied a newly developed craving. He was not doing this for himself. He was doing it for Roxie. In a way he was being of service to her. He was relieving her pretty hands from drudgery. But in so doing he was submitting to a standard which seemed to him like damned foolishness — as far as he alone was concerned — and swallowing a goodly amount of stubborn pride. This involved self-sacrifice. He was doing it, moreover, for another. This involved a conception of unselfishness. Bud had never been noted for either quality.

And yet he took a tremendous satisfaction in his efforts. The task proved so congenial that he carried it far beyond his first intention. On the second day he mounted his mare in the rain and posted to the village store. His idea was to buy new oilcloth for the table and a fresh coffee-pot. Before he was done he had included towels, blankets, a cake of scented soap, and a supply of tinned goods.

"Looks like you meant to git married," suggested Ed Bingham, the storekeeper.

"None o' yo' damned business if I am, is it?" frowned Bud.

"No-o," drawled Bingham with an instant desire to conciliate. "No-o, it ain't."

"Then fergit it," snapped Bud.

If Ed Bingham found this difficult under the circumstances, he managed to give his face the proper expression for registering forgetfulness as long as Bud remained in the store and that sufficed. He had his opportunity to express as freely as he wished his real opinions after Bud cantered off. He made the most of that. As far as Bud was concerned, he might, and be hanged. What was spoken to his face was one thing; what was spoken behind his back another and relatively unimportant matter.

Bud returned to his shack through the pouring rain, carefully protecting his purchases beneath a rubber poncho. Never had he minded less a wet ride, for the little mare's hoofs sang him a song all the way — a simple song with not much variety, but, to his ears, good to hear. It was merely this:

"Roxie, Roxie, Roxie."

It ran through his head all the remainder of that day and mixed itself with his restless dreams. It roused him at dawn and was echoed in the twitter of the morning birds greeting so joyously the clear sky. He rose at once with the realization that this morning had a significance of its own; it was the last he would have to face by himself. To-night he was to find Roxie and fetch her up here. That made it seem almost as though she were here now. He washed with considerable attention to details and slicked down his black hair until it lay plastered to his head.

Bud was confident. That was characteristic of his attitude towards any personal venture he undertook alone. It was doubly true of this one in which he was prepared to risk all in order to gain all. He saw no obstacles in his path; could conceive of none which might stop him. His plan was well outlined and simple; he would ride to the Howe shack after dark and leave his horse in the road just below. Then he would circle the house and post himself near the kitchen door in the rear. There he would wait his chance to see Roxie alone. He would not need over five min-

utes with her because this time he held all the cards. When he was done, she would follow him. No fear about that. She might come like a colt for the first time in halter, but she would come. It mattered little what her temper was at the start. She would tame.

Towards dusk Bud went through the shack once again and put everything in order. Then he took out his gun and examined it to make sure each chamber was loaded. Finally he piled up fresh wood and kindling beside the fireplace in order to have everything ready for a quick blaze. On the table he placed a kerosene lamp and matches. At half-past seven he closed and locked his door and went to the barn for his mare.

It was dark when Bud reached the valley, but he took the rest of the road on a gallop. There were those who later said they remembered hearing him pass.

"Thought it must be some one after the doctor," said one.

Another thought it was some one loaded with moonshine whiskey. All were glad enough that the mysterious night rider in such a hurry went by without stopping.

Bud picketed the mare in the woods just off

the road, not a hundred yards from the spot where Allston a few weeks before had been brought to such an abrupt and unexpected halt. Had Bud been interested he might have seen the tree still showing the scars made by Allston's machine. But that would have been to stir him up unnecessarily.

Bud trusted to the dark to keep him concealed halfway up the serpentine drive leading to the lighted bungalow, but when within reach of the light cutting a path over the grass, he swerved to the left and made a wide half-circle. From this point he worked his way more cautiously towards the kitchen. The door was open and through it he caught occasional glimpses of a figure flitting back and forth. It was Roxie. His heart, had he been blind, would have told him that. The sight spurred him on — made him resent caution. In another dozen paces he was at the door.

Roxie felt his presence before she saw him. She was hanging near the stove her wet dishcloths. Her back was towards him when suddenly she swung. At sight of him she stood transfixed. In that interval he crossed the room and seized an arm.

"I gut suthin' to tell yuh," he said.

As she shrank away he added in a lower, tenser tone:

"I'm *goneter* tell yuh suthin'."

She saw then that in his other hand he held his gun. It made her afraid—but not for herself.

"What's the matter, Bud?" she asked aimlessly.

"Come out hyar an' I'll tell yuh."

She grew suddenly cold. She shook as with the ague. Yet she followed where he led—away from the house across the fields until their voices could not be heard.

"That pink-cheeked fren' o' yourn—I seen him t'other day."

"Mr. Allston?" she trembled.

"Ef thet's his name. I seen him in the woods a-makin' up to Miss Wilmer."

Whatever Roxie had expected, it was no such line of attack as this. She stiffened.

"Yer lie," she choked.

"I seen him in the cove a-holdin' her hand," he went on, quite undisturbed.

"Yer lie, Bud Childers. Yer lie in your throat," she panted.

"I swear to Gawd I seen him—a-holdin' her hand."

"What was you doin' there?" she demanded, struggling hard against a new emotion that gripped her throat like a strangler's hold.

"What was I doin' thar?" he repeated slowly. "What was I doin' thar? I was passin' by."

That was all he said, but from his voice she knew. With a spasmodic shudder she drew back a step. He followed instantly, bending closer to her ear.

"I was passin' by like I'm passin' by here," he said. "But I ain't used to passin' by."

She made no reply. What he said was true. She turned towards the house. He seized her arm again.

"I left him for Miss Wilmer," he said hoarsely. "She can have the damned honey-lapper an' welcome. But you—I want you myself."

"Bud," she pleaded, her breath coming in gasps.

"I want you to-night—now. The mare is waitin'. I'm waitin'. But we cain't wait long."

"What you sayin'?"

"I love yer, Roxie. I've fixed the house all up purty fer yer."

"For me?"

His cheeks were burning with eagerness now. Roughly he pressed closer.

"You talk like we was married!" she exclaimed.

"To-morrer's time 'nuff for that. But I wanter make sure of you to-night."

All the fighting instinct in her flared up — the fighting instinct based upon her pride of womanhood. Like a fury she turned on the man.

"I'd die afore I went with you, Bud Childers!" she exploded.

"But yo'll come," he said. "Yo'll come."

"Go 'way! Go 'way!"

"I won't go away — without'n you. 'Cause if I do — s'help me Gawd I'll get yo' pink-cheeked fren' fust."

If the girl had been struck between the eyes, she could have been no more dazed. A blow would have left her less dazed because then she might not have been able to think. She could think now. Her thoughts ran like flames through dry grass. And like wild flames first in this direction and then that. There was so much in her poor little head that was inflammable!

Miss Wilmer and the Prince — a-holdin' hands!

It was a lie! Would n't she have known, living right here with them, if Miss Wilmer or Mr. Allston — but another burning thought cut in and enveloped this one. They did not know about her — neither of them — then why should she know about them? Love might be a hidden thing, like gold in the ground.

It was a lie — and yet something must have held Bud back when he had this man so at his mercy. It was a lie, and yet not the sort of lie Bud would make up. Bud could lie on occasion — he had lied that night he said her mother was sick — but he was not lying now.

Silently the tall, lean figure stood beside her in the dark awaiting her decision. She turned as though in hope of detecting in him some slight evidence of weakness. She could not see his face, but that was not essential. She felt the set of his thin mouth. He was grimly in earnest. He meant every word he said both about Allston and about herself. He had spoken of love — of love for her. Here was something to catch at. If he was honest about that, he could not be all bad.

But before she could reason very far along this line, she heard some one calling from the house.

It was Allston who had come into the kitchen.

Bud turned in a flash with half-raised gun. Allston stood framed in the doorway — an easy mark. With a desperate cry Roxie threw herself in front of Childers.

"I 'll go, Bud," she whimpered. "I 'll go."

CHAPTER XIII

Roxie made one request of Bud Childers.

"You'll let me go back ter the house and git some things, Bud?"

If any one else, under these circumstances, had suggested this, he would have grown instantly suspicious. Even now he hesitated.

"I—I'll tell 'um I'm goin' ter bed an' then they won't hunt fer me," she added quickly.

"I reckon you'll come back," he decided, "'cause ef yo' don'—"

"I promise," she whispered.

"I'll take yer promise," he said. "Ef you'll cross yer throat."

She crossed her throat.

"Then I'll wait hyar half an hour. Thet long 'nuff?"

There was a trace of consideration in the question.

"Yes, Bud," she answered.

She flew across the grass as Allston called again. She came to the house quite out of breath.

"Where in the world have you been?" demanded Allston.

"Jest out in the field," she answered.

"Queer," he muttered. "I was sitting there by the fire and all of a sudden I got worried about you. Star-gazing?"

She moved away from the open door and closed it. But there were two windows through which they could be seen.

"I'm all done hyar," she said. "Guess I'll blow out the light."

She waited for him to go back to the sitting-room. He did not move.

"I'm all done hyar," she repeated.

"Well?"

"I'm goin' ter blow out the light now."

"Then blow it out."

She crossed to the table and blew down the chimney. It was necessary to blow twice. Then she made for the stairs that opened from the kitchen to the rear room she occupied.

"Roxie," he called in the dark.

"I'm all done hyar. I'm goin' ter bed now," she answered.

"Just a minute."

She heard his feet moving towards her and would have run had she dared. But to do so

would only excite suspicion and that was the one thing she must avoid. His life, on as small an issue as this, was at stake. She heard him shuffle nearer and nearer and flattened herself against the wall.

"Roxie," he said. "You sure you 're all right?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't believe much in hunches, but — over there I used to have them and pretty nearly always they were worth following."

He was at her side now. He put out his hand. It touched her shoulder.

"I had a hunch about you to-night."

"Ye-es, sir."

"I didn't know but what Bud Childers was snooping 'round."

She did not answer.

"Keep away from him, Roxie. If he bothers you, let me know."

"I 'm goin' ter bed now," she repeated.

"All right, little girl. Good-night."

He dropped his warm hand from her shoulder. She felt as though it must have left a red mark there.

"Good-night," she stammered.

He left her side and made his way across the dark room to the door into the sitting-room. He opened it and in the full light she saw him framed.

It was a lie about Miss Wilmer. Her mouth half opened to call him back. If she told him everything, of how Bud had come to carry her off and was waiting out there, he could get his own gun and fight him off. There was still time. Even now he turned back as though expecting to hear her voice. Clenching her two fists she closed her lips tight. She had given her word and crossed her throat and even in a fair fight there would always be danger.

The door closed behind him. The room was in utter darkness again. Roxie, her hot eyes filling, fumbled her way up the stairs and into her attic chamber. She lighted her lamp and began to roll up a few things into a bundle; stockings, shoes, a nightgown — anything she happened to see. This gave a definiteness to Bud's proposal that terrified her anew. He was going to take her up there before she was married. To-morrow, he had said, they would go to the minister's — but what of to-night? She grew hot and cold. She

rose from the bureau drawer in which she was fumbling and stood upright — an animal about to spring. At sight of herself in the mirror, she grew flaming red with shame. She blew out the lamp and, crumbling, knelt by her bed as she did every night. She said her prayer — the only one she knew:

"Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take."

She had known this from childhood and it had always brought her comfort. But it was not adequate for now. In superstitious awe of what she was doing — half fearing it was blasphemy — she added a line of her own:

"Lord! Lord, please to let me die afore I wake."

If at that moment she had felt herself suddenly swooning off into death, she would not have been greatly surprised. She waited a minute expectantly, but nothing happened. It was life she must face, not death.

Suddenly — as though in answer to her prayer — she thought of a long, steel-bladed knife she used in the kitchen. She could take that with her.

It would give her something to fight through this night with. It would save her until to-morrow, and that was all she asked.

It would save her to herself, but not to the world. She realized that. No one would believe, with the opportunity for escape she now had, she went with Bud other than voluntarily. Her mother would not believe; the Mission would not believe; Miss Wilmer would not believe—because never, never, never could she tell why she did this thing.

Mr. Allston himself might not believe. He had warned her; had offered his protection. If, in the face of that, she went, he must think it was because she chose to go.

"Lord," she repeated, "dear, good, kind Lord—please to take my soul right away. I wanter be good, Lord. Please to take it."

If poignant earnestness can wing a prayer straight to God, that prayer sped like an arrow. And yet if He heard, He gave no evidence of it. Roxie breathed on, her white, girlish bosom heaving. The knife would save her to herself, but not to the others.

Weak-kneed and dazed, she rose to her feet

again. Time was passing and Bud was waiting. She had promised to be back in half an hour and the period of grace might have passed already. In the grip of a new fear akin to panic, she relighted her lamp. God was going to make her go.

It was curious how easily she swung in her thoughts from God to Allston. From this point it was upon him that she concentrated. In this mood she conceived a new idea. It might be that he would have another of those queer notions he called "hunches" and come up here to see if she was asleep. She must protect him against that possibility. To throw him off his guard she must write a note and leave it on her pillow.

She found the stub of a pencil and a bit of paper. She wrote impulsively and with little thought of what she was writing except the object to be obtained. Her letters were big and scrawly and many of her words mis-spelled.

Deer sir [she wrote]. I 'm goin off tonite and not comin back. You will no why sum day. I am allrite. Plese dont hunt for me. You have been orful good to me an with meny thanks I am your frend

ROXIE KESTER

If he did not find this to-night some one would find it in the morning. It would explain to

Allston why his hot muffins were not ready. When Roxie rose from the table she looked all about the room to make sure no one saw her. As an extra precaution she blew out the light. Then she pressed the note to her lips over the words "Deer sir," and kissed them again and again — wildly, passionately, sobbingly.

A moment later she pawed around in the dark for her half-made-up bundle, placed it under her arm, and stole down the kitchen stairs. Every time they creaked she paused and held her breath, though she knew the half-hour must be almost spent. Reaching the bottom she tiptoed to the kitchen table and felt around in the drawer until she found her knife. She concealed this in the bundle.

From the next room came the sound of voices; first Miss Wilmer's voice; then Allston's voice; then Miss Wilmer's voice, and finally a hearty laugh from Allston. She closed her eyes as though to shut out the picture this called up.

"It's a lie," she said to herself.

She went on out the door and across the grass. Bud was waiting. Detaching himself from the dark he hurried forward to meet her.

CHAPTER XIV

Allston talked rather more than usual that evening and he laughed often. But he was strangely restless. At least a half-dozen times he rose abruptly from his chair and walked about the room, picking up a book only to drop it, moving to the window only to turn away, lighting a cigarette only to toss it into the fire after a few puffs.

For an hour or more Wilmer noted his uneasiness without comment, but finally laughingly referred to it.

"If you were a woman I'd say you had the fidgets," she declared.

"No—it is n't that," he answered. "My nerves are steady enough."

"Then why don't you sit still?"

"I give it up," he smiled.

"It's that Bud Childers," broke in Howe. "He's getting on my nerves too."

Wilmer glanced up and shot a quick question at her father.

"You've heard something, then, that you haven't told me?"

"No," returned Howe.

"You've seen him?"

"No. I've neither seen nor heard of him for two or three days. I'd feel better if I had."

Wilmer turned to Allston with an uneasy feeling that something was being concealed by one of the men.

"Nor I," Allston assured her. "And I don't expect either to see or hear of him again. I have a notion his bark is worse than his bite."

Howe shook his head.

"I'm not so sure of that. Those men nourish a grudge for years. That's how feuds are bred."

"It isn't Childers who is bothering me," asserted Allston. "If I were obliged to describe my restlessness I'd have to turn to the spook world and I'm not very keen about that sort of thing."

He sat down again in his chair before the fire, between Howe and his daughter. The latter studied him a moment with amused interest.

"Somehow you're not the kind of man I'd suspect of being susceptible to spirits," she said.

He had rather avoided her eyes this evening. He had found them increasingly dangerous. He would have said that in the last few days they had mellowed and deepened. They were still like pools reflecting the brown of autumn foliage and he was still tempted to fish in them for smiles. But he could not forget what he had caught there once.

"Why do you single out me?" he asked.

"Because your feet are so solidly on the ground."

"I'm of the earth earthy?"

She frowned.

"Please don't misinterpret."

"I don't mean to, but isn't that what you said?"

She shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"I intended rather a compliment, but if you won't have it—"

"I'll accept all the crumbs of that kind you toss me," he interrupted.

"If you two are beginning another quarrel, I'm going upstairs," protested Howe good-naturedly.

He may have dozed a good deal in their com-

pany off and on, but it is surprising what a man of his age can pick up even when half asleep. He was sure of nothing yet, but his suspicions were aroused and he was not at all displeased with them. He had never met a young man who with so little effort had so thoroughly worked his way into his good graces. He had never met a young man whom he so thoroughly trusted. He proved that in his willingness to leave Allston so much alone with his daughter. He had not lived sixty-five years for nothing, and would have been quick enough to foil any development of this sort of which he did not approve.

As a matter of fact Howe for the last year or two had been more or less worried about Wilmer's future. Not financially, for he had means enough to assure her of independence in that direction. But he did not believe in that kind of independence for a woman. Marriage to him was the wholesome and natural estate of womanhood. He had been conscious of a growing fear that Wilmer was deliberately sacrificing herself to him in this matter. He had never discussed it with her. It was a difficult and delicate question to bring up. But he had thought a good deal

about it and could account for her apparent aversion to men in no other way. In spite of good health he was growing old and in his old age felt in his life the lack of those tiny baby fingers which so assist down the incline however gentle the slope. This craving for grandchildren is a sort of second birth. It is the logical continuation of growth. It makes for completion.

He could trust Wilmer to be sound in her choice—true to her heart—if only she would choose. He did not propose either to assist her or to advise. That would be an impertinence. With this newer generation it was possible for a father to be impertinent towards his daughter. He used to resent that where now he only smiled at it. He would not assist her directly, but whenever it was possible to retire gracefully from the field where these two were trying each other out, he welcomed the opportunity—even when he knew it annoyed Wilmer. As now, for example.

It was only nine o'clock when he rose upon the slightest of pretexts, to go to his room.

"No one is quarreling," protested Wilmer.

"Call it a disagreement, then," answered Howe.

"If you'll stay I'll read to you."

Wilmer looked to Allston for support. She received little.

"No," declared Howe, "I'm really ready for bed."

With that he made his sturdy way across the room and went upstairs, Wilmer following him with a candle. When she returned, Allston was over by the window again staring out into the night. He came back to the fire as soon as he heard her steps.

"I feel," he said, "exactly as though I heard some one calling—but so far off that I can't identify either the voice or the words. Queer, is n't it?"

"The imagination plays strange tricks sometimes."

"You think that's all it amounts to?"

"Certainly. What else?"

"I don't know. I'm always getting back to that fool phrase; I don't know."

"We ought to know—always," she said.

"I suppose so, but do we?"

"I—"

The phrase was on her own lips but she checked herself.

"Go ahead; finish it," he insisted with a note of triumph.

"I refuse to be so stupid," she answered, evidently nettled.

"We may as well be honest with ourselves."

"As long as we remain sensible," she finished for him.

"Sensible? I wonder what we mean when we say that?"

"I mean governed by intelligence," she replied instantly.

"Yes," he admitted. "That's a good definition. Only—it does leave out a whole lot."

"Nothing worth while," she insisted dogmatically.

"It leaves out war."

"Perhaps war isn't worth while."

"But there it is. The idea governed a good many million men for five years. And there wasn't much intelligence back of it when you think it over in cold blood."

"Many were governed by the idea of self-protection and that's intelligent."

"It's more instinctive. And the instincts—are they intelligent?"

He spoke rather more earnestly. She answered rather more cautiously:

"When properly trained."

"But when properly trained we should n't have instincts," he laughed. "We should have only reason."

"Well?"

"Having chased our tails we are back where we started."

"I don't see it."

"Then let's try again. Being sensible leaves out — love."

She moved her chair a trifle — to turn her face away from him and towards the flames.

"Does n't it?" he asked.

There was one good feature about that objectionable phrase of "I don't know" which she was willing enough to admit; it furnished, at least, a convenient refuge. If ever she had wished to use it, that was now. Without some such retreat one was forced always to direct answers.

"Perhaps you're a better authority on love than I," she parried.

"You're wrong," he returned quickly. "I don't know a thing about it except that, as far as one can observe, it is n't always sensible."

"Your observations have been — extensive?" she queried.

There was a touch of coquetry about her now that enlivened her mouth. Her profile, he thought, was several years younger than her full face. The gentle curves that outlined her lips and rounded chin were at this moment — she had unconsciously relaxed her usual control over them — those of a girl of eighteen.

Allston leaned towards her, his long arms on his knees.

"My observations cover a period of not more than a week or two," he said.

"No?"

"And I can't make head nor tail out of them."

"Your deductions may not be at all accurate," she suggested.

"They are scarcely scientific," he admitted. "They are based upon a series of impulses."

"Impulses are dangerous," she reminded him.

"And yet they get hold of one," he said tensely, "like instincts."

She rose upon the pretext of poking the fire. She rose instinctively — as one draws back at the approach of a flame. What was tempting her

to reach out her hand and smooth the hair back from his troubled forehead? It was a little act of tenderness she sometimes indulged in with her father, but this man was not her father. Nor her brother. Nor bore any blood relationship with her whatsoever. The tenderness that sought expression in some definite act like this rather than in words, that demanded contact, was akin to mother love. Yet there was a difference; a distinct difference. Mother love is a result, born of the past. This emotion of hers was a desire urging her towards the future. It was more complex than mother love and more poignant. It was even less intelligent.

Yet—she felt like offering a little prayer of thanks—it was her intellect that enabled her to keep herself in control in this emergency. And with everything against her. Both her cheeks and her eyes tried to play her false. Only the heat from the burning logs before which she stooped saved her from an involuntary confession. They accounted, after a fashion, for her flushed skin and her excited eyes—brown still, but shot through and through with dazzling golden arrows as though some one had suddenly swept aside

the autumn branches which kept them cool and let in the glare of the living sun. Reason, however, was still on her throne. She could still dictate as she chose the thoughts to which she would allow audible expression.

The only trouble was that, in contrast with those she concealed, the spoken thoughts sounded so utterly inane that she would much have preferred to keep silent. That privilege, however, she could not permit herself. Silence was far more expressive than speech.

So for another half-hour she rambled on in an effort to keep their conversation in the placid waters of banality until in desperation she was forced to seek safety in flight. This at a time when she knew that as far as her own thoughts went, flight offered no protection; this also at a time when she felt — uncannily enough — as though some unseen hand were on her arm urging her not to leave him. She could not account for that. It served further to confuse her. Doubtless it was merely a normal reaction to his strange mood. Yet it should not be in the face of her derision of that mood.

At half-past nine Wilmer excused herself.

"Perhaps a good night's rest will help your fidgets," she said to Allston, as she lighted her candle.

He rose.

"Perhaps," he admitted. "Though I refuse to call them fidgets."

Her mind was aggressively acute to-night. She seemed driven to pick up every phrase and analyze it.

"I wonder if it makes so much difference what we call things," she reflected. "People argue over definitions as though it changed the thing itself."

"I suppose it's just another attempt to be honest."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Or to avoid the truth — dishonestly."

"And yet if we spoke the stark truth as it comes to us, would n't we make mistakes?"

Again the warning flame across her cheeks.

"Oh, it's possible to keep on forever getting nowhere," she exclaimed.

"And you're tired," he said anxiously.

"Good-night," she answered simply.

She was about to turn away when he extended his hand.

"Good-night," he said with a wistful plea in his voice.

She hesitated a moment and then placed her own warm fingers within his broad palm. But only for a second. He had no time to close over them.

"Good-night," she whispered, and hurried up the stairs leading from the open room to the floor above.

He watched her until she disappeared—the flash of her pretty ankle the last glimpse he had of her.

CHAPTER XV

Allston blew out the big lamp on the table and sank down in a chair before the open fire. He was tired neither physically nor mentally. And yet in some ways he was glad to be alone. For the last few hours he had been under a nervous strain in Wilmer's presence. He was like a man in a closed room with many doors trying to feel his way out through one opening and then another, discovering that some of the doors gave a little way and others not at all, in the end to be left exactly where he started. Further, to complicate matters, that thin voice in the dark outside still called to him. He heard it even now above the rustling and creaking and eerie moan of a rising wind beating against the house, presage of a storm.

It was extraordinary to him that such a situation could have developed out of such innocuous material. The whole adventure had begun so lazily and drowsily! Half asleep at the wheel of his wheezy gray runabout he had been keeping to twenty miles an hour over a country road

that seemed as though it might end at any time in primeval forest. It was just the setting he had sought for that complete relaxation which was to allow his mind, muddied by two years of war, to settle into the placid pool it always had been. So it had seemed about to do when Roxie Kester appeared in the road and forced his head-on collision with a chestnut-oak. But that seemed merely like a temporary interruption. The kindness of the Howes offered him just as good an opportunity to bask in the sun as did the open road. This was a golden land dripping with milk and honey where a man need not keep his eyes more than half open. It was a country of blue sky and birds and shocked wheat and flowers and people at their ease.

It still was. If he could only get hold of that idea and keep it, he might find that the present crisis which appeared so acute was merely a morbid mental condition unwarranted by fact. He was only a guest in passing. He had distorted his values. This was only a bypath incident not to be taken too seriously. The main road of his life lay in another direction, though where only the Lord knew. Somehow it must be related to

the past he had already lived, and must develope out of those surroundings with which he was already familiar.

Yet it was not easy to think of any future which should eliminate this girl who had just left him. He had known women twenty years, neighbors at home, whom he could banish with less difficulty. He had seen them with his eyes alone. He had never made them part of his thoughts — of his deeper thoughts. And they had never made him question himself. Nor had they ever made him feel.

It was at this point that he found himself most baffled in his relations with Wilmer. She made him think, but she parried every thought. She made him feel, but she checked every expression of that emotion. There were moments when he felt he could break through that reserve, but he never quite dared to try after his one attempt. Then, too, he was held in check by the conditions under which he was a guest here. Unvouched for, he was under even deeper obligations to his host than one accepted under the conventions. He was in honor bound not to violate the trust imposed upon him. He could advance no farther

than he was asked. And Wilmer was not always easy to interpret.

To-night he was more bewildered by her than ever. The net result of this evening had been to increase the tension between them while leaving everything at loose ends. He could not fairly blame her alone for that, however, while he was ragged in his own thinking. It began to look as though this clarifying process which had appeared so simple during the first few days of his flight from home was becoming decidedly complicated. If he had succeeded in clearing his mind of one kind of jumble, that of troop trains and transports, and the braggart tyranny of superior officers, it was only to fill it with another kind dominated by quite as autocratic a type of tyranny. It seemed that a woman's eyes could, in their way, bully as effectively as any uniformed overlord with his jingling spurs.

Allston began to pace the floor again. The wind was increasing in volume and driving scattered raindrops against the windows with the velocity of bullets. An occasional flash of lightning cut a blazing path through the dark like star shells, though the light was not held. And from a

distance, beyond the mountains, he heard the low rumble of thunder so like the heavy guns that used to growl through the night over Flanders that at moments it was difficult for him not to believe he was back there again. This might have been one of those deserted houses in that old French town in which he had been billeted except that it lacked the marks of age. But it is the mood that counts in a picture; not the details. The Huns were attacking over Green Mountain and he was here to do his little part to drive them back. Barbarism was in a new clash with civilization. He felt this so keenly that his hand as another star shell burst went back to his automatic. And then came the voice again.

This time it was more individualized. It sounded like the voice of Roxie Kester. That was absurd, of course, but the notion gave him a start. The girl had acted strangely when she came back to the kitchen from across the fields. It was queer that she had been out there at all except that young women were subject to odd spells of that sort. He had not been satisfied when he left her and might have been considerably worried had not other matters come in to occupy his attention.

Allston tiptoed through the kitchen and outdoors to see if her light was burning. Her window was dark. The wind whipped his face and drove him in. Still he was not satisfied. Action whetted his fears. It became necessary now, if he hoped to get any rest, to allay his anxiety once for all. Striking a match he made his way up the stairs to the door of Roxie's room. It was closed, but he listened there for sound of her breathing He heard nothing, but that proved nothing. Reluctantly and not at all sure of the explanation of his action he could give if she did answer, he knocked. He received no reply and knocked again —louder this time. But even so he was held back by his dread of rousing the rest of the household. It would be easier, should his alarm prove groundless, to explain his conduct to Roxie than to either Howe or Wilmer.

The continued silence became ominous and oppressive. He was finding it difficult to breathe as though the hall were being exhausted of air. Cautiously he turned the handle and pushed. The door opened, but the room was in utter darkness.

He whispered her name:

"Roxie."

Then:

"Are you there, Roxie?"

Silence now gave him a direct answer. He struck a match and held it above his head. The bureau drawers were open and one shoe stood in the middle of the room. The white bed was empty and undisturbed. On the table he saw a lamp and lighted this. Then he caught sight of the note on the pillow. The fact it was addressed to him was significant. Under ordinary circumstances she would have written to Wilmer. As he read, every word justified his suspicions. But at the sentence, "Please don't hunt for me," he saw as clear as daylight the hand of Bud Childers in the affair.

The note dropped from Allston's nervous fingers to the floor. He did not pick it up. He knew every word by heart. For two hours she had been calling to him and he had not answered.

But why, if in danger, had she not called upon him when he sought her after dinner and offered his aid? The note answered that. She was trying to protect him. In some way, by some ruse, Bud had bullied her into following him and she had deliberately sacrificed her one chance of escape.

The inevitable deduction swept Allston back to that night at the bend in the road when she stood before him with her head tilted back and her eyes closed. In her white dress silvered with moonlight she had made a romantic figure. She was like some gentle creature sung of in idyls. A man might well pray to be saved from such a temptation as she offered him then. He had not been insensible, though, thank God, he had held steady. It had for him been but a passing moment, but for her it had meant more. He saw it now — fool that he had been. He saw it now when it was possibly too late.

There was one chance in a hundred that Roxie had gone home. After that the chances were a hundred to one that she had gone with Bud Childers. It was now ten o'clock. Within two hours he would know.

Allston had not been so coolly sure of himself since he stepped out of uniform. His face hardened and something of that merciless tint of blue steel took the place in his eyes of their natural color. His thoughts clicked into place like cartridges in a machine gun. All the qualities that military discipline had trained into him reas-

serted themselves with automatic precision. He moved quickly and without hesitancy.

Crossing the room he extinguished the lamp and came out, closing the door behind him. There was no need of rousing the others. They had much better sleep on. He meant to have the girl back here before morning, and in that case there was no reason why they should ever be disturbed by knowledge of the episode.

He came downstairs and went to his room for a coat and hat. Here he stopped to examine his revolver and to slip into his pocket the remainder of his cartridges. He found about a dozen. He closed his own door, returned to the sitting-room to make sure the fire was safe there, and hurried out.

It was pitch dark — inky dark. The wind was still blowing and the rain increasing in volume. He bent against it as he took the road to Roxie's house he had followed before. It was pitiful that he should be obliged to waste the time necessary to eliminate that faint possibility, but it was essential. Before he ventured to force himself into Childers's shack he must be certain of his facts. That was too grim a business to undertake except upon firm ground.

His progress was slow and labored. The road was rough, and he frequently found himself out of it and floundering among the bushes. Always there was the temptation to quicken his pace and always he resisted that. He must take no chances of spraining an ankle. And he must keep plenty of strength in reserve. He had seen too much of the reckless folly of advancing to a point farther than support warranted. He had watched whole regiments wiped out as they occupied their forward positions with spent strength, the helpless victims of fresh attacking troops. He must not be exhausted when he finally reached the home of Bud Childers.

Not that he anticipated any such weakness. He had learned that, given the occasion, one's resources are well-nigh inexhaustible. Again and again in France he had found himself just beginning to draw on his strength at the point where in civil life he would have been ready to quit. And never had he been dominated by so inflexible a will as now. Duty and patriotism will carry a man far, but such a call as this which now urged him on will carry a man even farther. Here was Duty linked, not with an abstract idea,

but with the most concrete appeal a man can know — that of a woman in need of his strength.

As Allston fought his way on, as he pitted his might against the obstacles in his path, Roxie became still more clearly outlined. He thought of her less as a child. This startled him at first. It left him uneasy. It was better, in some ways, to think of her as a child.

But this thing she had done for him — if his deductions were correct — was the act of a woman. And such a woman! Unreasonable and unwarranted it was! Unjustified and uncalled-for it was! But also it was magnificent!

This much Allston appreciated and responded to with a thrill. And yet even so he had not begun to plumb the depths of her intense little being. He interpreted her act as one of heroic self-sacrifice based upon an exaggerated sense of gratitude for the protection he had given her. That was enough, God knows, to spur him on, but it left out, too, so much — so much.

The windows of the Kester house were dark when he reached there. That told him nothing. He pounded at the door without response and that told him more. Roxie would not have been

as difficult as this to rouse. With his worst fears revived, he kicked at the wooden panels as the rain beat down upon him. The passing minutes were becoming of more and more value. He tried the latch and shook it impatiently when he heard shuffling footsteps within. A voice called to him —the voice of an old and timid woman.

"Who's thet?" she demanded.

He answered with a question.

"Is Roxie there?"

"Roxie hyar? No, Roxie ain't hyar. She's up to Miss Wilmer's. Who be you-all?"

Allston had already taken a step back. The wind tore his reply to shreds. He must make the mountain road now as fast as the night would let him—remembering always to keep plenty of strength in reserve.

One thing helped him; the afternoon he had returned from that little cove on the mountain-side Howe had questioned him as to where he had been. As he told, Howe clapped a hand upon his shoulder.

"Big Laurel is up there. Keep away," he warned.

"Why?"

"You must have been within a few hundred yards of Childers's shack."

It was not that fact which left so vivid an impression in Allston's mind, but what he had thought while walking by the side of Wilmer. He was glad enough now, however, that it served to place him. He could have returned to that cove with his eyes shut.

Against a background of storm-rent clouds and the formidable bulk of mountains and a sea of tossing trees, a man is but a tiny object. With the night and the winds and the beating rain against him, it would seem that he would count for no more than a dead leaf. And yet ever since man was man and not merely some grubbing insect, the elements have spent their fury against him in vain. Again and again on the ocean and on the desert, in the frozen North and the tropic South, on mountain-top and plain, man has faced their worst and often enough survived. If at times he is pitifully easy to kill, at other times he is unconquerable.

Yard by yard Allston fought his way along the mountain road that follows the slope of the hills and past the Lutheran church which gave him his

bearings. With the creek on his right he stumbled through a heavy growth of hemlocks, passing several shacks in darkness. Each time he mastered the temptation to rouse the occupants and inquire his way. To do this would be possibly to reveal his business — would inevitably reveal his presence in the neighborhood — and that seemed unwise. These people were certain to be more friendly to Bud than to himself. In the end he might be obliged to take that risk, but he knew that Bud's shack opened somewhere from this road into a clearing, and he felt sure that however late the hour he would find it lighted. If he knew Roxie there would be little sleep for Bud that night. Whatever club the bully held over her head to make her follow would not be effective enough to cow her utterly. If left alone Bud might win in the end, but he would have a fight on his hands that could not be settled in a few hours.

That was a fair argument, and yet with every passing minute Allston felt the strain of the delay. She might not be conquered, but she must be suffering. And for every second of pain he was responsible. Unwittingly she had placed him in a position where this could not be otherwise.

So for another ten minutes he floundered on, and then, to the right and ahead, he caught through the trees—flashing on and off as the waving branches passed before it—a yellow gleam. He pressed on faster and nearer. A sharp turn brought him to the log which crossed the creek to the clearing before the shack. Cautiously he moved over this. The light from the uncurtained window did not carry far and the rain dripping down the panes obscured his sight of the room within. He paused now, a little out of breath. It was not easy to wait when so near, but this was no easy task he had before him. A single careless move might end for all time his usefulness.

He had once read somewhere that there is no such thing as an accident; that every mishap can be traced directly to some one's mistake. He had always remembered that. It had served him in good stead in the war. It helped him to a cool judgment that cut down his own mistakes.

When he moved a few steps nearer the window, he was in complete command of himself. The driving rain was to his advantage. It made it easier to look in than to look out. With his auto-

matic in his hand he crept to within a few feet of the shack, and standing a little to one side of the window peered in. What he saw made it very difficult for him to breathe normally.

CHAPTER XVI

ALLSTON, from where he stood outside the shack, had Childers within range, and as he saw the big fellow standing before the shrinking figure of Roxie, he was tempted to shoot. He was restrained by his unwillingness at this point to kill and by fear of the consequences, if he attempted merely to cripple the man, that might follow to the girl before he could reach her side. He must be patient a few moments longer and if possible get inside the house. Only then could he secure the drop on Bud.

Allston knew nothing of the floor plan of the shack, but he saw a door leading from the main room to the left of the fireplace and so supposed there must be another entrance in the rear. If not he might find an unfastened window. In this reconnoitering, the tempest which had until now opposed him changed its colors and assisted. He could move freely without danger of being overheard. Circling to the left he went around the spring-house. But now he no longer had the help of the lamp within. He had to feel his way, fol-

lowing the house as a blind man does. He came to a darkened window — the kitchen window — passed it and so reached the frame of a door. His fingers felt their way across this to a latch which rattled as he touched it. He could thank the wind once more for disarming suspicion at such unusual noises. All the evening long it, too, had been fumbling at this latch.

But Allston knew that once he opened this door the wind would follow him in and rushing ahead announce a visitor. This would give Bud the time he needed to seize his gun. And that in turn meant shooting to the death without either explanation or argument. This Allston wished to avoid, if possible. Bully and brute the man might be, but he was entitled to a hearing; bully and brute the man might be, but Allston preferred that some one other than himself should administer that kind of grim justice. He himself had no desire to kill. His concern was with Roxie rather than Bud. He was perfectly willing to give the man a mauling if opportunity offered, but his chief business was to rescue the girl.

Allston had noted that to the right of this outside door and just inside there was another room.

With that in mind a plan of action suggested itself which would make that eager wind at his back serve instead of foil him. If he swung the outer door wide and stepped in quickly, he could shove open this inner door and hide himself in that room. The wind hurrying ahead would summon Bud, who, the chances were, would think the storm had beaten open the door. Allston then might have his chance at the man as he passed. If not, he would still have the advantage of being inside the house. He would retain that advantage even if Bud started a search. For Bud to find him must hold a light.

Allston acted promptly — the one gamble he was taking being that the door was locked. Gently he pressed the latch and shoved. The door opened and the storm swept down the narrow hall to the lighted living-room beyond. Allston stepped noiselessly into the right-hand room, keeping as near the sill as was safe. He heard an oath from Bud and then silence.

Childers was waiting to see what, if anything, followed the opening of that door. Nothing followed but wind-laden rain that made the lamp flicker. The hall was only feebly lighted, but when

Bud cautiously ventured to look the length of it he saw enough to be assured that it was empty. And so, quite off his guard, he strode down to close the door. This time he shoved the bolt that locked it.

It was while he was at this task, both hands occupied, that Allston sprang. He brought the butt of his automatic down hard just over the man's temple. Bud staggered and Allston threw his full weight upon him bearing him to the floor. At the same time he found the fellow's throat. For a moment Allston held on, but Bud was quite still. In falling he had struck his head hard enough to knock him out.

From the next room Allston heard the moaning cries of the girl. He called her.

"Roxie!"

The crying ceased instantly, but he received no reply.

"Roxie, come here."

She came on a run then. She saw Allston still full length upon the man.

"Find me a rope," he ordered.

"Mister Allston!"

"Quick!"

She vanished to reappear a few seconds later with a piece of stout cord. Allston turned the fellow over and bound together his two wrists with the army hitch designed for just this purpose. Roxie watched, dazed and breathless with both fear and blind joy.

"Now bring the lamp," he commanded.

As long as Allston issued orders to her she could act. If only he would continue—indefinitely. That was all she asked for, just the privilege of obeying.

When she returned, Allston stooped and examined the man's wounds. There were two ugly gashes, one over the temple and one in the blue-black hair. Allston sent for water and when she brought it sopped his handkerchief in it and washed away the blood which had trickled over Childers's face. Both wounds he discovered to be superficial. He cleaned them as best he could and felt Bud's pulse. It was steady. In fact, before he was through with his examination and first-aid treatment the man had begun to revive. His eyes flickered open and he tried to make his feet. That was not easy with tied hands and became further complicated as Allston promptly sat on his legs.

"Steady there," he warned. "You're going to stay put for a while."

Bud experienced difficulty at first in understanding the situation. This was like some evil dream. He twisted and writhed for a moment and then settled back to the inevitable. His lips twitched, but he did not speak.

"Now, Roxie," said Allston, "we must find more rope. Look around, will you?"

"You—you gotter watch him," she panted.

"I'll watch him, but I can't spend the rest of the evening on his legs. It's late and—we've a long way to go."

She brought an old leather halter-strap. This served well enough, though Allston could not fasten it as tight as he wished. However, it made it safe to leave the man and he was beginning to feel the cold. First, however, he took the precaution to remove Bud's gun—a villainous-looking Colt big enough to bore a hole the size of a walnut.

"Better stay quiet," warned Allston. "If I hear you moving I'll find more rope. Get that?"

Bud's level eyes, hard as dagger blades, met those of steel blue before him. He deigned no re-

ply. His face was as immobile as though cut from granite.

Allston picked up the lamp and led the way into the next room. He tossed a log on the open fire and removed his wet coat, Roxie watching him in silence and awe. He warmed his numb hands over the blaze, surveying the room in detail as he did so. It was cleaner than he had expected and more attractive. With the cold wind rattling the windows, hopelessly, and the rougher features of the surroundings subdued by shadows, with the warmth of the wood flames tingling pleasantly on his skin, he reacted quickly from the ugly incidents of the last few minutes. What, a short time ago, had seemed so grave a problem was now no problem at all. The moment he felt Roxie to be safe and sound, as obviously she was with Bud eliminated, he was rather inclined to accept the whole situation with easy good humor. He turned to Roxie with a smile. She was standing back against the wall—as far back as she could get. She was wearing no hat and her hair had become loosened, a detached strand hanging over one temple and another over her forehead. With a quick movement and in some embarrass-

ment as she saw him looking at her, she swept these back into place.

To Allston she was just a child again. He sank into a chair with his wet, muddy boots thrust towards the flames.

"Roxie," he said, "you certainly arranged a real hike for me to-night."

She was silent a moment and then she broke out:

"What fer — did you come?"

"To take you home," he answered easily.

"Who asked ye?" she demanded.

"*You* did."

"You lie!"

She spoke without thinking. The phrase sounded harsher than she intended. She meant only to deny.

Allston turned in his chair to face her.

"Come over here by the fire."

"I don' wanter."

He rose.

"Then I 'll have to come to you, but I wanted to dry my feet."

At that she ran to his side.

"Please," she begged, "yer boots is all muddy an' wet."

As he sat down again willingly enough, for his legs really were heavy and his feet bruised, she knelt by his chair, and before he realized what she was doing began to unlace his shoes. As she did so her voice fell into a low crooning.

"Po' feet," she murmured. "They 's all wet an' hurt — they 's all wet an' hurt. Oh, I did n' know you 'd come. I did n' know. It 's all my fault."

Her fingers were fumbling at the strings — her bent head by his knee. He placed his hand upon her silky flaxen hair.

"Roxie," he protested, "don't do that."

"Yer 'll ketch yo' death o' cold. An' it 'll be all my fault."

"Get up, child."

"They 're mos' done now."

It was true enough. She had them off before he could object further and had placed them on the hearth.

"You 'd spoil any man, Roxie," he smiled.

"I never done thet fer no man afore," she answered.

"And you should n't again."

"I 'd do it fer you ag'in."

"I shan't ever let you."

"Then what fer did ye come?" she cried.

"To fetch you home."

"Back to Miss Wilmer's?"

"Certainly."

He was a bit puzzled by her questioning. He did not know where it was leading, but he had an uncomfortable feeling that it was leading somewhere it should not.

"I ain't a-goin' back to Miss Wilmer's," she answered with tightened lips.

"Of course you are," he insisted with a trace of irritation.

"Who's a-goin' to make me?" she challenged.

"Make you? No one. You're going because it's the place for you to go; because you want to go."

"I don't."

"Look here, Roxie —"

"I don't," she repeated, with a sharp stamp of her foot. "An' ef you wanter go an' hold her hand some more you kin go."

The last part of her speech was a wild, unconstrained outburst. A moment ago she would have choked herself before she would have allowed it to escape her lips. Even now she stood back aghast, though still aggressive.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Allston, his eyes held to her by the intensity of her passion.

As he started to rise she sank down in a heap, her legs weak beneath her. Leaning forward she buried her face in her hands. Allston retained his seat. He did not dare move; did not dare touch her. He was confused and uncertain.

"Who's been talking to you, Roxie?" he frowned.

"Bud—he seen," she choked.

"Saw what?"

"Seen you a-holdin' of Miss Wilmer's hand down to the cove."

Suddenly she lifted her wet face to his.

"Unless he lied," she trembled. "Mebbe he lied. I tol' him he lied."

Allston caught his breath. Bud must have been in the bushes. With a chance like that, why hadn't the fellow shot?

"Mebbe he lied," she said again, her face eager with new hope.

"But if he didn't?"

"I won't never go down ter Miss Wilmer's ag'in," she choked.

CHAPTER XVII

In the dark hall, bound hand and foot, Bud Childers lay flat on his back staring into Hell. In the old days of the Spanish Inquisition devilish minds spent days of thought in devising new tortures by which to bring with a nice appreciation of every fine point fresh torments to individual cases. The infliction of pain was a profession. But even these fanatical experts could have contrived nothing better adapted to the especial requirements of Childers than this which Allston —wholly without that object in mind—had hit upon.

Bud's very soul was seared by the realization of how he had been foiled, outwitted, and manhandled by this pink-cheeked stranger—this honey-lapping interloper—this lily-fingered rival. The fellow had thrown and tethered him as though he were a yearling steer. And he had done this in Bud's own home—in his own inviolable cove. Allston had kicked him one side like a yellow dog within the sacred precincts of his own shack and left him like a crippled pup in

the dark. And Roxie had been a witness of this ignominy.

But that was not all. That was enough to make a man writhe like a salted worm, but it was not all. Allston was still here. He was occupying Bud's own living-room. He was sitting in one of Bud's chairs. He was warming himself before Bud's fire. And this with Bud's own woman aiding and abetting.

Gawd A'mighty! Gawd A'mighty!

As the full meaning of it all burned into his brain, Bud found it as difficult to breathe as though he were being strangled. He could hear their voices from the next room, though he could not make out their words. That was worse. It left him free to imagine. They were talking about him and laughing.

Gawd A'mighty!

Bud strained at the ropes binding his hands — strained until the cords bit into his flesh. He tested his strong legs against the ankle straps until his muscles cramped into knots. He turned his head this way and that, his mouth open like a snapping dog, until the sweat stood out upon his thin forehead in great beads. It ran down

into his narrowed eyes, burning them with salt.

Here in his own shack! Here where for three generations no man had dared tread without being asked! Here in these rooms he had made ready for Roxie — she who on the morrow was to have been his bride! The egg-eyed hornyhead!

He was breathing like a man who has run a mile. His big hairy chest — made deep by so many trips up and down the mountain — heaved spasmodically. It was well his heart was strong — else something might have snapped. It was carrying a heavy load. As it was there were moments when those thin lips covering that iron jaw grew first purple and then white.

He could hear their voices and hear their feet when they moved. If Allston had only come out here occasionally and kicked him, he could have stood it better. But the man ignored him as though he were not there. They talked on and for all he knew held hands — in the room where the sprig of laurel stood in a bottle on the table: on the table covered with new oilcloth which he had ridden to the village to buy for her. This man was treading with his dirty feet the floor Bud had got down on his knees to clean for Roxie. And she was in there beside him.

Bud lay passive for a few minutes. The cold wind slithered in beneath the door and marked him as with a knife-blade where it touched his skin. It played with his disheveled black hair. It worried, like a playful pup, the bottom edges of his trousers and his ankles. It maddened him like something alive bent upon teasing. He kicked out at it with both tied feet.

And the man who had done all this was the man he had allowed to go when he had drawn a sure bead on his heart that day in the cove. What a cussed fool he had been not to put an end to him then and there! God give him one more such chance—just one more! God give him half a chance—just a fighting chance! With a gun or a knife or with his naked fists. He had not fought with his hands since he was a boy, but now he felt the instincts of a mountain cat. He craved to claw and to tear. He ached to bite with his yellow teeth as animals bite.

Again he tested his strength until the muscles in his throat stood out like whipcords. He could not understand why the rope did not break. With the strength now latent in him he felt that he could snap iron chains. It was maddening. When

finally he sank back once again limp after his effort, he felt a choking sensation in his throat like that which comes to small boys helpless in their rage. Something akin to tears moistened his hard blue eyes. To offset this, he voiced an ugly oath below his breath.

He flopped over on his side to relieve the weight of his body on his hands. There was humiliation in that act itself. It gave him the effect of groveling. He had seen dogs, belly to the ground, crawl along like that, and it always filled him with contempt. He felt the same contempt for himself. But quickly following every such emotion came his black rage against Allston — the man who forced upon him each additional torment.

Gawd A' mighty!

But all this while Bud spoke never a word out loud. There were moments when he could have shrieked in rage; there were other moments when wild oaths sought expression. But every time so tempted he brought his thin lips tight over his teeth. Had Allston himself come out here, he would have been met with stolid silence. Speech to Bud, when highly moved, expressed nothing.

It was too utterly inadequate. His emotions drove him to stolidness—to the stoicism of the Indian.

At the end of ten minutes Bud had spent in unavailing struggle the first mad onrush of his blind rage. By brute force he had failed to accomplish anything except to lacerate his flesh. He accepted this fact as a fresh humiliation. He had pride in his physical strength. The deepest satisfaction he could have had at the moment would have been to burst these bonds Allston had fastened upon him.

Exhausted mentally and physically, he lay quiet for a moment. Passive, he found himself able to think more clearly. It was barely possible that what could not be accomplished in one way might be in another. A rat was a small animal, and yet by industry and patience he generally managed to secure his ends. Bud had seen them by constant gnawing eat their way through oak beams that would have foiled the strength of a bear. A rope was made up of many fine strands. If a man could break them one by one, it was only a question of time when he would have them all severed.

Bud squirmed his long fingers tipped with hard nails until they reached the hempen cords. Then he began to scratch against them — slowly, laboriously, painfully. It was a tedious process. But the rope was old. He could feel the outer strands fuzz up as he continued. He could also feel the calloused tips of his fingers quicken as the skin wore away. It was a question which would last the longer. It was a question how much time he had, anyway. But with those voices coming to him from the next room he must be doing something. And one can never tell.

Gawd A' mighty, if he should get free — !

CHAPTER XVIII

Roxie Kester had ridden up here this evening sitting behind Bud and holding to the man's big shoulders to keep from falling. Bud had kept the mare to a walk and they had journeyed in silence. She had not been afraid. This was not altogether because of her reliance on the long-bladed kitchen knife which she had slipped from her bundle and hidden in her bosom, although this had helped to steady her. But the deeper reason was that even on that long wild ride she had thought less of herself than of some one else. She had eliminated herself — as far as her future was concerned — the moment she left the house and joined this other. She had made her decision. She had made her sacrifice. Twice her Prince had risked his life for her and now she was risking her own for him. She was doing even more. There was a certainty here. A man may clash with another man — may clash even with a chestnut-oak — and escape. He is risking only his life. But a woman may not place herself in such a position as she was now in and avoid the con-

sequences. However she protected herself until morning, it made the next step inevitable. Not to marry Bud the next day would be to stand disgraced. The only explanation she could give that would justify her conduct, she must not give. The toothless old gossips would roll the story around their tongues like snuff. A girl does not spend the night in a mountain shack unless she chooses.

Yet Roxie was neither afraid nor depressed. She was in a state of exaltation paralleled only by religious ecstasy. Love — such romantic love as hers — is heroic. Heroism is nothing but complete and utter unselfishness. Her joy came in giving, not in asking. If she could not give herself to him she would give herself for him.

The wonder is not that the young are inspired to such idealistic heights; the wonder comes to the old and sophisticated. Men and women are born poets — women more often than men. And poets are a simple people living outside themselves, in touch with the singing stars. Only as they turn wise and think of themselves do they grow blunt and blind and are forced to grope their way on the surface of the earth.

Roxie could allow her thoughts to wander at will on that ride up the mountain-side. She could permit them to take flight where they would. She had given all that she had to give and so was entitled to take all that remained for her to take. There was no need of repressions. She had won the complete freedom that only love can give.

So she thought of Allston as she chose — calling him Ned as in her very secret heart she had long called him. Aye, she could kiss his hair now and his white forehead and his lips. Throwing back her head, the rain beat down upon her face and each drop was like a kiss back from him. There were thousands of them, but not too many. How her heart leaped at the thought! How it sang! A thousand, ten thousand were not enough to satisfy her hungry heart.

A man may carry a lady off on horseback without carrying her heart at all. A man may take a lady into the black forest and have none of the best of her. A man may shut a lady up in the fastness of his shack and wonder what has become of her.

Bud dimly realized that much an hour later. It did not discourage him, but it puzzled him. He

had looked for protest and outcry and he was met by an uncanny silence. Once, when he tried to take her hand, he was warned off, but even then so quietly that he was dazed. At the end of another hour he was staring at her with a new eagerness and growing passion that might have made him dangerous — when the back door had swung open admitting the tempest.

The presence of Ned Allston was in reality fraught with more tragic consequences to Roxie than to Childers. The latter had been thrown and tied, and that was the end of him. But Roxie had been set free — and that was not the end of her. She had been released from the end. She was forced to face a new fight — a fight made more intense by the leeway she had so recently given herself. It is one thing to stay within bounds and another to move out of bounds and return again.

Allston in the last few hours had become more distinctly personal to her than before. He had stepped into reality: so much so that when he stood before her in the flesh she was half ashamed to face him. She remembered the rain and her upturned mouth. It was because of that she had allowed herself to speak of Wilmer.

He had not denied the story Bud had told of what he saw in the cove. Then it was true. She was sitting on the floor, Turk fashion, and Allston was still in his chair studying her with his puzzled blue eyes. To herself she repeated over and over again the question she had asked of him, "What fer had he come?"

All he was doing now was to take away her dreams—the one thing that had saved her. He was not changing other conditions in the slightest. He was making them even worse. Did he think she wanted to go back to Miss Wilmer's and watch him hold her hand?

She felt the venomous sting of a new emotion—of jealousy. The poison works swiftly in such natures as hers.

In the meanwhile Allston had come to some realization of the problem he faced. Another man might have been quicker, but another man would not have been Allston. That the girl had her romantic moments he was aware—every one, man or woman, has those; but that she had carried them as far as this he had never suspected. His mind had been far too occupied in another direction. Even on his way up here when, under

the stress of the struggle, he had sensed something of the significance of her act and that in a way it involved him, he had not associated it with love. Rather had it seemed like a magnificently impersonal poetic idea. For two years, in France, he had been in touch often with just this sort of thing. Again and again he had seen it govern the fine acts of men and women — of young men and women. Under the spell of it he had seen them make sacrifices that staggered the imagination. Sometimes it was in the name of country; sometimes in the name of duty; sometimes in the name of honor; sometimes in the name of gratitude — but always it was utterly impersonal.

To him Roxie from the beginning had seemed of this type. She reminded him in many ways of those extraordinary young peasant women with whom he had come into such fleeting contact — the women with the liquid black eyes so quick to respond to elemental emotions, but so steady withal as one saw them in their mothers and grandmothers. Somehow Allston had always understood them enough to respect them, which could not be said of some of his fellow officers. He had glimpsed the finer stuff that lay below

the tempting smiles, and understood, too, something of the abnormal conditions under which they were living.

Roxie had been just such another, though under no such tension. She was as good to look upon as a mountain flower. She possessed much of the same natural beauty and many of the same natural imperfections. And she fitted well into her own surroundings, appearing best in the woods, under sun or moon. She was at her best here to-night in this mountain shack where the wind and the rain were more companions than enemies. In the glow of the firelight her hair shone like spun gold, and her skin, tanned and even freckled in places, was as beautiful as the spotted ochre of a tiger lily. One did not ask here for peaches and cream. And her eyes of light blue were as shallow and as deep as the sky at noontime. Her nose and mouth, a trifle pinched, but wonderfully alert—like the nose and mouth of little forest things dependent for their lives on smell and taste—held him where more perfect features had often left him indifferent. Her perfect little body, both strong and light, had its own beauty. Rightly she should have been

barefooted. He had a notion she had as shapely a foot as Trilby's.

Back of these physical attributes there was an undoubted personality, and here again he was forced for comparison to the forest creatures — the gentler ones like the doe and squirrel. Naïvely wondering and trustful he saw her, ready to respond to affection, quick to start at danger. It is flattering to any man to have such a personality come to him without fear. As a result of it a man may feel better than he is.

It is always dangerous to compare a woman with anything but a woman. It is dangerous to compare them, anyway. Each one must be taken by herself no matter how much like all others she turns out to be in the end.

Allston, in reviewing swiftly his few points of contact with Roxie, could find nothing on his part that suggested indiscretion. He might justly take a certain amount of satisfaction in that, but it did not alter facts — if what he was beginning to suspect was a fact. He was by no means sure of that even now. He meant to avoid being sure if that were possible. The best way to accomplish this was to get Roxie out of here at once and back to normal conditions.

Allston reached for his boots. They were still wet, but he forced them on and laced them. Then he took his automatic and stepped out into the hall to make sure Bud was safely tied. He found the man silent and motionless, and without speaking to him returned to the sitting-room. His plan was to notify one of the neighbors on his way down the mountain road and have him come up and free the fellow.

Roxie had watched from the corners of her eyes every move Allston made. And she realized that every step he took forced her that much nearer a final decision. It was evident that he meant to go back and intended to take her with him. But it was impossible for her to go back — impossible for many reasons. And yet of them all she could not tell him one.

It was impossible because she could no longer remain in the same house with him and Miss Wilmer — and yet to tell him why would be to tell him all and she had told him too much already.

It was impossible because even if Miss Wilmer accepted her, the valley folk would not. Yet, if she told him that, his next question would be to

ask why, then, had she come? To answer that would be to tell him all.

It was impossible finally because it was utterly impossible. If ever she left this house with him, Bud remaining behind alive, it would mean his death more surely than as though she had not come at all. She knew how Bud felt out there. She knew it with a keen realization of the anguish he was suffering, which amounted at moments almost to pity. Bud—he deserved it. He had brought it on himself. And yet it was cruel hard. She did not enjoy seeing any one suffer. When she saw a man kick a vicious dog, she was sorry for the dog. And Bud—he had his bad points, but he was not a dog. Had Allston killed the man outright, fighting for his own life as he had a right to do, she would have felt no regret. Obliged to choose between the two men, she would not have hesitated to choose for Allston. And she realized that all Allston had done to Bud, after coming here, was necessary. Only he should not have come.

That was the pity of it. His coming left her with no alternative—and without her dreams. Bud could not be allowed to starve to death out

there. Some one would free him. Once free, he would kill. There would be no hand left to stop him. It was doubtful if now even she could stop him. But she must try.

To do that she must remain behind with him. She must give her life — anything Bud asked for — to buy him off from his revenge. He would ask all. There was no doubt about that. Perhaps in the end she might not have enough. And yet if he wanted much she would have much to give. The more he wanted, the more she would be able to give. So in the end she must make him want — must whet his appetite. Here was a grim test for a woman.

But that was all to come later. For the present she was concerned alone with Allston. He must go and she must stay. The sooner this happened, the better it would be for both. And this drove her quickly and definitely to her final sacrifice. There was just one way in which she could bring this about; one clear, logical way that would answer for all time his every question and send him home safe and happy to Wilmer. It came to her, as he reëntered the room with his jaws set so firmly, that she was half afraid of him. As she

thought of her plan, she sprang to her feet and faced him with a nervous tremor. Most of the color had gone from her cheeks on the instant.

"Roxie."

He spoke sharply—incisively. She had never heard his voice like that.

"Yes, sir," she answered.

"Put on your hat and coat."

"What fer?"

"We're going now."

"Goin' now? No, sir, I ain't goin' now."

"Don't delay," he ordered. "And don't be foolish."

She braced herself—holding her feet a little apart as though steadying for a blow.

"I ain't goin' now. I ain't goin' no time."

Unconsciously she had fallen back into the vernacular both in words and voice. There was a drawling softness to it that Allston noticed. It made for tenderness. It was difficult for him to maintain his rigid sternness in the face of it. Yet that was the only safe thing to do.

He seized her arm.

"Quick!" he commanded.

She shook herself free with a semblance of in-

dignation. Most women are born actresses, given the occasion. And Roxie had the occasion. Her heart and soul were in the stand she was taking. Certainly the stake was big enough — his life and nothing less. She was playing for a larger salary than most real actresses receive.

"Don' tech me!" she cried.

His brows came together.

"Good Lord — do you want me to throw you over my back?"

"Do I want ye ter throw me over your back?"

Her blue eyes flamed. Had it not been for the cost to him, that is just what she would have liked. But the cost to him was what made it impossible.

"Damn it, I'll do it if you don't come *now*," he threatened.

(Out in the hall alone, Bud was clawing, clawing, clawing. He had been clawing all this time. The tips of his fingers were bleeding, but the rope was fuzzing deeper and deeper. Every now and then he stopped to strain at it. Gawd A' mighty, if he should get free — !)

"Put on your hat and coat or I'll do it for you," insisted Allston.

The words she was trying to utter stuck in her throat. This acting business was not so easy after all. Yet she found her voice when Allston almost roughly seized her arm again. The touch of him gave the inspiration she needed.

"I 'm goin' ter stay hyar. I 'm goin' ter stay with Bud," she trembled.

"You what?"

"I come hyar with Bud. Ain't I got a right?"

"But *why* did you come?"

"I come because I wanted. He asked me ter marry him an' I said I would. Ain't I got a right?"

"You mean you love him?"

Here was a direct question. It demanded a direct answer. She turned her eyes around the shack like a frightened animal. The man before her followed her gaze. She could not get away from him. So finally —

"Yes," she answered.

"You came here of your own free will?"

"Yes."

"And the note you wrote was simply to throw Miss Wilmer off the track?"

"I — I hed ter tell her somethin'," she pleaded.

"Lord!" he broke out. "What a farce! What a farce!"

She did not know the meaning of his words, but she saw something like a smile below his frown and she did not like that.

"If folks would only leave other folks alone!" she cried.

Allston started.

"There's real philosophy in that," he nodded. "If folks would only leave other folks alone!"

(Bud was still clawing, clawing, clawing. It hurt. It hurt like the devil now. He writhed under a new torture. He paused for breath as he heard their voices in long-continued conversation. They gave him a new incentive. He gathered himself together and throwing into the effort every ounce of his strength he strained once again at the weakened strands.)

Allston turned from the girl and paced the room once across and back. The story she had just told came like a shock. It hurt, in a way, his pride. It was a blow at his ideals. If at first it did not sound plausible, it sounded upon second thought more plausible than the original interpretation he had given. Natives, after all,

were natives in whatever part of the country they lived and however good to look upon they were. It was perfectly normal for her to fall in love with one of her own. And this man Bud, if no better than most of his fellows hereabouts, was not much worse as far as his observation of the last few weeks went. He was a little more autocratic and domineering than some, but he liked him for that. Howe had spoken of him as "bad," but without much concrete evidence except for the story that he had once killed a man. To Allston that did not sound as significant as it might have done a few years back. He himself had killed his man. In battle, to be sure, but so was Bud probably in a battle of his own.

Allston came back to his original position before Roxie. It was as though she had grown older in the last few minutes. She did not stand as straight. And so he suddenly saw her as fitting almost perfectly into these surroundings.

"So that is it, Roxie," he said more gently. "You came because you wanted to come. And you're here because you want to be here. But—you aren't married yet?"

The girl trembled at that.

"No, sir. I ain't married yet. But Bud—he said to-morrer he'd marry me."

"And you believe him?"

"Yes, sir, I believe him. Oh—I gotter believe him."

"Then you ought to have waited until to-morrow."

"But I did n'."

"You were afraid Miss Wilmer might object?"

"Yes, I was 'fraid o' Miss Wilmer."

"I think most likely she *would* have objected. And yet if you love the man—"

Why did she cringe at that?

"And yet if you love him—why, there is n't any answer. Love is seldom—intelligent."

"I dunno," she answered vaguely.

She wished that he would not talk any more. She wished that he would go. Every second he remained was making it more difficult for her.

"You know the man and what they say of him?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And of course you believe he loves you or you would n't have come. And that is the important thing; if he loves you, little girl. You 'll have

him at your mercy — if he loves you as he ought to love you."

In her bewildered brain that suggestion of his seemed to fasten. It was being loved, he said, not loving that was important. "You will have him at your mercy," ran his phrase. If only that proved true, then Allston was safe.

"Why don't ye go now?" she questioned.

Suddenly the lamp flickered. The flame flared up, then down, then up again, smoking the chimney as a gust of wind swept down the hall and into the room. Allston's hand flew back to his automatic. Clutching it he ran out into the empty hall. At the same moment Roxie ran to the table and extinguished the light.

CHAPTER XIX

Bud had escaped. That was the meaning of the flickering lamp. And Roxie understood well the danger to Allston of standing exposed, after this, in a lighted room. Bud's gun was here, to be sure, but he might have another hidden about the place—in the barn or the spring-house.

Allston had run into the hall and, finding his man gone, had promptly closed and locked the door through which he had escaped. The problem no longer was to keep Bud in, but to keep him out. Cursing his stupidity in not having maintained a closer watch, he struck a match in order to search both side rooms. Roxie, running to his side, warned him of the danger.

"He'll shoot through the winder!" she cried.

This was a chance he had to take. Remembering his own ruse which had gained him admission in the first place, he did not care to see it repeated by another. He found both rooms empty. Bud had sought the open where he would be able to secure another gun and ammunition.

It was uncanny how in the space of less than a

minute the whole situation had changed for all three of them. Roxie was quicker to realize this fact than Allston. She was quicker because for her the change meant more. Bud was now completely out of her power. As long as he had lain there in the hall, she was still in control of him. She had within herself the tribute price for Allston's ransom. But with Bud gone this opportunity had been snatched away from her. She was left quite helpless — pitifully helpless.

And yet for a moment she felt as though suddenly soaring into the clouds like a released bird. If she had lost her power over Bud, he in turn had lost his power over her. For her this meant, for the time being, freedom — a wild, unnatural sort of freedom. She was a prisoner here with the man she loved. Their interests now, instead of being opposed, were mutual. Bud was against them both. And there was nothing she could do to prevent this; nothing Allston could do — until morning, anyway. They were as isolated as on a desert island.

Allston himself did not see this, at first, quite as clearly. He was for immediate action.

"We must get out of here quick!" he snapped.

"But we can't," she broke in eagerly. "He—he'll kill us both. Bud'll kill us both."

"You forget I've got his gun."

"You've gut *one* gun."

"It's the only one he had."

"In his pocket. But outside he mought have others, an' long's ye don' know, it's jest as bad."

"But when you don't know you always have a chance."

"If he ain't gut a gun, he's gut sticks and stones. He'd kill with somethin' afore yuh could git through the door."

"There are two doors. He can't watch them both."

"Only yuh can't tell which. An' after what yuh done ter him — Oh, you don' know Bud like I do."

"I know he's killing mad," admitted Allston.

And yet, had it not been for Roxie, he would have taken his chance and made a dash for it. Once through the door it would be a fair fight. It maddened him—even as it had maddened Bud—to be held in check like this. He began to pace the room—keeping out of range of the glow from the dying fire.

Then a new thought flashed into his mind. If what this girl had told him was true—if she were really in love with Bud—then there would be no harm in leaving her here.

She was standing in the shadows over by the table. He strode to her side and she crowded close to him. She acted afraid, and that under the circumstances was not natural. She ought to be glad that her lover had escaped. And it made his own course obvious and simple. If he went out, Bud would come in and this would end the whole affair. A moment ago Roxie had refused absolutely to return with him. If that was her position before Bud escaped, it was still her position. Had he gone away and left her to free Bud—and he had seen no alternative—she would have been exactly where she would be if he went now. Bud had only forced by a few minutes the inevitable.

With only himself to consider, then, Allston did not propose to spend the rest of the night up here. It was both humiliating and unnecessary. It might easily turn out to be something worse. If he were not back at the Howe bungalow by morning, the house would be in a turmoil. With

Roxie gone, too, his absence might be misinterpreted.

Here was a fair argument, and yet he was not altogether convinced that it would hold. It did not explain fully Roxie's present attitude. Well, then his suggestion might force that explanation.

"Roxie," he said quietly, "a moment ago you told me you came here because you wished to come."

"Yes, sir," she admitted with a start.

"You said you were going to stay."

"Yes, sir, I 'lowed I was goin' ter stay with Bud."

"Did you mean that?"

Her senses were acute. She felt he was leading her into some sort of trap. She did not answer. Frantically she tried to guess the meaning of it.

"Were you telling the truth?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir," she answered because she was forced to answer.

"It's hard to believe—somehow," he said. "And yet I don't know why it should be. In time you were bound to marry, if not with Bud—then with some other Bud. Perhaps I've been thinking of you as younger than you are."

"I'm eighteen," she replied as a statement of fact.

"And that's young or old according as you've lived. I saw men of eighteen in France who were fifty."

"Yes, sir."

"There are moments when you seem older than that and moments when you seem younger. That's the trouble. What are you now?"

"I'm eighteen."

"And you're sure you know your own mind?"

"'Bout how I come to come up hyar with Bud?" she asked suspiciously.

"Yes."

"Yes, sir, I know my own mind 'bout thet."

"And about staying?"

"Yes, sir, I know my own mind 'bout stayin'. We — we gotter stay till mornin' now."

"We?" he frowned.

"Bud, he — he'll kill us certain."

He spoke more sharply. He was only going around in a circle and he was tired of circles.

"Listen, Roxie," he said. "What you've told me about Bud changes everything. It's evident enough now that I butted in where I don't be-

long. If Bud loves you, and you love him, you're safe enough here, and the quicker I get out the better. What I want you to do is to make what in the army we called a diversion. You stand out of danger and swing open the back door and I'll cut out the front. Bud ought to be glad enough to see you to forgive your part in it."

The girl cowered away. She did not speak. The silence became tense.

"That's all there is to it," he went on. "You're game?"

Slowly the full irony of her fate made itself manifest to her. She did not know it as irony. It seemed to her more like some cruelly righteous form of retributive justice. The lie she had told to save the man she loved had been turned against her to threaten his life. She had lied to drive him out of this house away from Bud Childers and this same lie was still working to drive him out—but this time into the clutch of Bud. She did not believe for a moment that he had a chance to escape as he proposed. He did not know Bud. Even if he got through the door, he would not be allowed a hundred yards down the road. If he took to the woods, he would be

a stranger there against Bud who knew every foot even by night. Bud would make sure and she could not stop him. The one and only chance she had of protecting Allston now was to keep him here until he was missed at home — until Miss Wilmer and Mr. Howe roused the village and sent out help to him.

She had lost her power over Bud by staying without a struggle with Allston. Her one opportunity for regaining her influence had been to send Allston away and release Bud with her own hands. That would have meant something to the man; it would have been a tangible proof of her friendliness that he could have understood. To bring about this opportunity she had deliberately sacrificed whatever good opinion of her Allston may have had. And now Bud, by escaping, had spoiled all those plans just as Allston, by coming, had spoiled all her other plans.

It was pitiful. She was stripped of her last vestige of influence over either man. And this at a time when she needed it most; when she had made each an even greater menace to the other.

That was because she had lied. It was wrong to lie. God hated a liar. His punishment was ter-

rible and swift. She saw that now as vividly as though it were expressed in some flaming sign in the sky.

Trembling the girl clasped her two hands. She wanted to get down on her weak knees and pray for forgiveness.

"Why don't you answer, Roxie?" Allston questioned sharply.

She did not answer because she felt as helpless as a mere onlooker; because she could no more think of what to say or do than a baby in arms before some awful catastrophe about to envelop her. She found herself repeating silently that little prayer which had been once before her last refuge this fearful night. The second line she said over and over again:

"I pray the Lord my soul to take. I pray the Lord my soul to take."

That other time the steel-bladed knife which she had brought to the shack as protection against Bud was the answer to her prayer. And now the prayer—or a certain temporary poise resulting from reliance on it—furnished her with another solution. In reality this answer sounded more like the voice of God than had the

other. If the suggestion was daring, it was the sort of daring of which the Lord might be supposed to approve. And it was both simple and logical like most of the acts of God.

Swiftly Roxie looked up and met Allston's blue eyes. She could not in the shadows see much of them, but she felt them. They were steady and honest—of that she was sure. They were the sort of eyes that made it easier to tell the truth than to lie. And that was what the still, small voice advised. If she were being punished now for not having been honest, the only way she could redeem herself was from this moment on to tell the truth. God might not forgive altogether her first offense, but if the truth did not expiate it nothing would. No matter at what cost to her pride, to her instincts as a maiden, she must tell the truth.

"Speak," he commanded.

So she spoke—her lips quivering.

"It—it ain't Bud I love, it 's—it 's you," she stammered.

"What?" he cried.

"It 's you," she stumbled on. "Oh, it 's allers been you. I could n' help it. I 'm sorry."

Queer, feeble, jerky little sentences these through which to express as deep an emotion as that now shaking her—racking her. But they were the best she could do.

And feeble though they were, they struck home to Allston like knife-thrusts. He felt weak after them. For he believed—at least that she believed. This explained a dozen facts that had been vague; a dozen facts that he had allowed to remain vague even when they aroused his suspicions, because he in his turn had refused to face the truth. It was clear to him now why she had come here; it was because of this love, to save him. No other explanation was big enough to make plausible her willingness to risk her honor on this night alone with Bud. And all the incidents that followed fitted in accurately and convincingly.

Not for a second did Allston doubt her sincerity. And his big heart flamed up in response to the nobleness and heroism and idealism of the act—foolish as it was and as unworthy of it as he knew himself to be.

"God!" he breathed. "What a wonderful woman you are!"

"I couldn' help it," she moaned. "Bud—he said he 'd kill yuh an' he 'd 'a' done it too. An' I thought—"

She looked so abject, so pitiful, so alone in her misery that Allston could no more refrain from what he did next than he could have refrained from picking up an outcast kitten mewing in the cold. He stepped nearer and gathered her into his arms. She came unresisting—weak from the continued tension of these last hours. She buried her face on his shoulder, trying hard at first to stifle her sobs, but finally letting herself go completely.

Allston held her tenderly and in silence. That seemed to be the only thing to do. Words were quite useless; reason, unavailing. Whether she was right or wrong or he right or wrong was not, in such a crisis, important. This was some isolated moment to be handled by itself.

If he could not respond with the deep emotion that stirred her, he felt his cheeks burning in answer to the clinging appeal of her warm arms, to the clean incense of her hair, to the feverish eagerness of her rapid breathing. He would have been either less or more than man had he remained

insensible. Lightly he brushed her flaxen hair with his lips.

He felt as though he had been swept back a hundred years—a thousand, for all he knew; back to some time when the world was made up of nothing but stars and trees and men and women. This mountain shack of hewn logs might have been his own. And all he saw and all he knew was what it contained and what the forest roundabout contained. The rest of the world counted for no more than it did before the days of maps. Life must be lived and its problems, as far as they concerned him, settled right here.

Unconsciously his arms tightened about her lithe young body. In response she raised her flushed face a little—shyly, but with new confidence.

"You won't go—now?" she whispered.

Her words startled him back to the present. His arms fell to his side.

"Now I *ought* to go!" he cried.

A shattered pane of glass followed the report of a gun. Some one outside was beginning to probe the shadows.

CHAPTER XX

Bud, after making his escape, ran down the mountain road to the home of Roge Carver, where he borrowed a rifle and ammunition. Roge loaned both without either question or comment, although later he admitted to his neighbors that it did occur to him that the incident was more or less unusual. It was not easy to understand how Bud happened to be without a gun of his own when within so short a distance of his shack, or why he needed one, anyway, on a stormy night at one o'clock in the morning.

"He was all riled up," explained Roge. "So I did n' hold no talk with 'um."

No one disputed that as an unwise decision. When a man like Bud goes gunning in the dead of night, he is best left alone. The explanation Roge offered his wife when he returned to bed seemed fairly reasonable.

"Mebbe one o' them Enfield boys is prowlin' round."

On the whole, however, it made little difference to his neighbors what Bud was about as long as

they were not immediately involved. That a man out there alone on the mountain-side, in Stygian darkness, was battling with all the devils of Hell did not interest them. Bruised and sore from head to foot, with the tips of his raw fingers quivering, Bud could fight it out and welcome as long as he kept to himself. It even made little difference whether he lost or won.

As he staggered up the rocky road, he would have been the first to admit the truth of this. This was his fight now—his alone. He could depend upon neither God, man, nor the Devil for assistance. He was against the universe and the universe against him. Even the mountain wind bred in his own mountain trees had played him false. It had lured him into danger at the door. It was trying to press him back even now and whipping his black hair into his eyes. In desperate rage he cursed it as he stumbled on.

No matter how small the man, there is something Homeric about his struggles when he comes to grips with elemental forces. Whether king or common slave, a man who swayed by big passions does his best against odds acquires a certain majesty. Men respect even rats who fight hard for life.

If Bud had been dominated at the moment of his escape by nothing but black revenge, this, before he returned to the shack, had changed into something else, no less intense, but on the whole worthier. His objective remained still the same—the death of Allston. But while he lay bound upon the floor suffering acute physical pain, he had looked forward to this as a matter solely of personal satisfaction. It was man to man then, with Roxie stimulating the enmity, but she herself almost wholly eliminated from the final issue. Once Bud was free and, rifle in hand, within sight of his own door again, the girl assumed to him her old importance. Because, as he realized now, with Allston dead, she would be left more than ever his. The first time he had secured no more than temporary possession; this time possession would be permanent.

So after all he did not stand altogether alone against the universe. With Roxie still alive that was not possible. God, man, and the Devil—they could all be against him, but as long as he kept within striking distance of this girl he could still hope. In a way she was nearer him at this moment than she had ever been before. He had

until now been under certain restraints. She had forced upon him a compromise. For her sake he had twice spared Allston. She could not expect that again of him. The issue now was clean-cut and that suited him better.

Within a hundred yards of his shack, Bud paused. The windows were dark—a fact that made him smile grimly. It indicated that the two were still within or they would not have taken this precaution. And that they were still inside was all he asked. It meant that they must come out—in one hour, two hours, ten hours, twenty hours. It did not much matter when. They must come out of one of two doors.

Bud took up a position by the spring-house to the left. From that angle he commanded either door. With rifle cocked he sat down to wait.

But waiting was a more difficult business than he anticipated. That was because his thoughts refused to stand still. And yet often enough he had sat on a rock for hours at a time waiting for a buck to pass down a mountain trail—waited stolidly and indifferently for his quarry. He had not then been worried by thought. He had been patient enough. This was all that was necessary now.

If Allston had only been in there alone, Bud could have sat where he was a week, indifferent to sleep, indifferent to hunger, indifferent to the weather. Each passing hour then would only have heightened his expectancy. But Roxie was there too.

He wondered what the two were doing. There were moments when he thought he caught the sound of their muffled voices — as he had caught them when he lay prone and bound on the floor. Then the moisture started to his forehead and his arm muscles twitched and the tips of his raw fingers began to quiver. He was tempted then to beat down one of those silent, blank doors and force his way in.

Only he knew better. He would be shot in his tracks — through the panels most likely. He did not underestimate his man — pink-cheeked, lily-fingered though he might be. Lily fingers could pull a gun trigger quite as easily as any other kind. Furthermore, he had had evidence that Allston could shoot straight. He did not like to remember the night of their first meeting when this stranger had shot the gun out of his hands. Yet it was one of the things he could not forget.

He must wait—but what were they doing in there? Holding hands, perhaps. Gawd A'mighty! And he sitting out here in the dark—sitting outside his own home!

It was curious, but from the first Bud had never considered as a possibility the fact that Roxie might really care for this stranger. His mind could no more conceive this than that she should not in the end care for himself. Allston was fooling her, that was all, and she was being fooled. One of the traditional old wives' tales hereabouts was of a country girl ruined by a city chap. Bud had heard it since a boy. He knew of other cases, too, where the villain had not been a city chap; but those stories, though based on sounder evidence, were not as dramatic. They were, perhaps because of this evidence, distinctly commonplace.

Whatever Roxie's relations with Allston were, then, they were only temporary. And she was not at fault. She did not know men. It was the old story of the summerer and his fine clothes, except that Roxie would never be fooled too far. Bud knew that. He had known it before, but the early part of this evening the girl had proven it. The

little wildcat had taken a knife out of her bosom and started for him. And he—well, he was almost tempted to risk one cut for a kiss. Her eyes had stopped him. They had warned that the cut would be deep.

Now she was in there with Allston. That was what made it hard to wait. It was this which moved him from his position once and urged him to one of those front windows. Cautiously he peered in. He could see only the dying fire lighting dimly the hearthstones. But this sight maddened him. It was cold outside, and here he was barred from his own fire. To the right was a black shadow. Upon the impulse of the moment he raised his rifle and fired into it. Then he moved back swiftly to his point of vantage by the spring-house.

Nothing followed. The shadow evidently was only a shadow. It was expecting too much to hope it was anything else. Roxie was no fool. She would see to it that Allston kept out of range. For that matter Allston himself was no fool.

Bud made up his mind that he could look forward to little action until morning, and the only consolation he could get out of that was that

daylight would increase his chances. Daylight would make the result certain. In the dark a man, no matter how good a shot, might shoot wild. Once the sun was up Bud knew that not even a rat could move ten inches from either doorsill.

With his rifle across his arm he sat down, his thin lips drawn taut, his blue eyes as hard and cold as steel.

CHAPTER XXI

Allston did not minimize the danger of his situation. He knew that the odds were against him and that those odds increased with every passing hour. After dawn his chances of getting out alive would be ten to one against him. But his only alternative was to make a dash for it with Roxie, and that would be to risk her life as well as his own. Bud would shoot at anything that moved from either door. He must wait until Bud could distinguish clearly between them.

Allston accepted his lot like a gentleman. He even appreciated the grim irony of his plight—the sardonic humor of it. He had come up here to save Roxie and had succeeded in doing nothing but endanger her; she in her turn had come here to save him and had only placed his life in jeopardy. Both had been actuated by the highest motives, but these had worked only for their doom.

There was something wrong about that. Though helpless, Allston was by no means resigned to any such outcome; neither for Roxie

nor for himself. There was too much good in this girl to have any misfortune come to her. As for himself, life had never seemed sweeter. He did not mean to let go of it without a struggle.

Yet, too, life had never been more confused. Roxie clung to him now like a child in alarm. After her confession, she abandoned herself utterly to her emotions — quite trustfully, without a trace either of fear or reserve. Yet she did not seem bold. Her sincerity saved her from that.

They had retreated into the far corner to the left of the fireplace, out of range of any window, and here they sat down upon the floor. This child-woman snuggled up to him kitten-wise, her head upon his shoulder. And he placed his arm about her, knowing her as half child and half woman; more child than most children, more woman than most women.

So, a thousand years ago, he might have sat in some cave guarding his woman against the entrance of wild beasts. Inhaling the incense of her hair, feeling the quick beating of her heart, conscious of the love which had already sacrificed so much for him, which was ready to sacrifice so much more, it was difficult to drag him-

self back to the present; difficult to see straight.

Yet that is what he must do—whether he lived on or not. To see straight while he did live was more important than living on. And in this crisis the calm, steady brown eyes of Wilmer Howe came to help him.

He had not forgotten her. Something of her presence had been with him all the evening. He had felt it again and again, though in the turmoil of vivid details which followed so swiftly one after another he had not always visualized her. And it had not been easy either to tell just what part she was playing in this isolated drama up in these black hills. Their relations had been so purely intellectual that it was difficult to fit her into action so largely physical—the clash of body against body rather than mind against mind.

But now, it seemed almost as though she were standing before him, a silent onlooker. The suggestion was startling enough at first. It sent the blood to his cheeks. And then he found himself meeting her imagined gaze quite coolly. There was nothing here of which he need feel ashamed even before her.

It was very quiet inside the shack. Outside the wind was still reeling in and out among the trees boisterously as a drunken sailor, but distinctly it was outside. The doors were safely barred. The gale scarcely stirred the dark within save when occasionally it puffed down the chimney and revived into a glow the dying embers. And the girl in his arms lay very still like one not daring to move for fear of breaking a spell.

It was only a few hours ago that Allston had left Wilmer, but he felt as though days must have passed. Yet less than five hours before, she had lighted her candle and excusing herself had gone upstairs to her room. He had watched her pretty feet as they twinkled out of sight. A half-hour later, he had no doubt, she was sound asleep.

Perhaps, in her dreams, she had followed him up here; perhaps, in her dreams, she was now looking to see what he was about. The continued silence began to rouse his imagination. It did so even in the face of the startling reality he was still confronting. With Roxie's heart beating against his arm, it was not of her he thought, but of this other.

If Allston had been timid in his mental ap-

proach to Wilmer before, he was bold enough now. With a possible margin of only five hours of life ahead, a man must needs be bold if ever. True values assert themselves willy-nilly in such a crisis.

He had realized from the moment of Bud's escape that never had the desire to live been so keen in him, and in the next few hours he learned why. In France he had faced death even more intimately than he was doing to-night and had done it with a certain indifference. Not that he was either dulled or depressed; not that he was insensitive to what life meant or that he sought escape from its responsibilities. He was then in an utterly negative state with the issue completely out of his hands. And he had seen so much of death that it had lost its horror. About the only distinction he made between live men and dead men was that the former were still able to move. The latter lay quietly where they crumpled up — sometimes for days. He had passed groups of such immobile forms as unemotionally as he passed broken tree branches.

On his mission up here to-night, he had not considered death either one way or the other,

although he had sensed his danger. Roxie herself was the one who finally brought him face to face with a full realization of the issue. It was she who had finally forced the fatal situation. And she had done this, unwittingly and unconsciously, in the name of love. Humbly and out of a full heart he drew his arm tighter, and she opened her eyes and looked up into his face and smiled.

Lord, what was this thing called love? It was symbolized as a winged cherub and expressed in terms of June roses, and yet it drove men relentlessly to the very brink, and over, of death. And women, too; young women scarcely out of girlhood.

And it drove men on to life when death would be simpler. Allston did not want to die. He wanted to get back to Wilmer. Give him one more hour alone with her and he would beat down her reserve—would sweep her into his arms and hold her there. He had been playing with love. He had not realized the bigness of his passion. It had seemed to him some dainty, fragile emotion to be handled as cautiously as a delicate vase. And love was one of the two vital things of a man's being. There were only two;

love and death. Everything else was trivial. And love was neither of the intellect nor of the heart. It was of the soul.

That day in the cove when he had seized Wilmer's hand, his soul had spoken. It had bid him take, then and there. She had drawn back from him—yes. But that was because he was half-hearted. He had not pressed on.

Roxie moved a little.

"You're cold?" she asked anxiously.

"No. Are you?"

"Cold—here?"

"The fire is going out," he answered. "I'll poke around and see if I can't find a blanket."

"Please don't," she pleaded.

But he rose abruptly. He needed to be on his feet. Instantly she rose, too.

"He'll git yuh through the winder."

"You stay here," he ordered.

"Mister Allston!"

He moved down the hallway towards one of the side rooms. She followed.

"Stay where you are," he commanded.

She obeyed, but her lips began to tremble. She did not want to let him out of her sight. She was

afraid lest the dark might swallow him up forever. She was none too sure of him now. The fairy book might close at any moment and the story end.

But he came back with his arms full of blankets torn from the bed — clean new blankets which Bud had bought within a week. He spread one down upon the floor for her to lie on.

"Perhaps you can get a little sleep in the next few hours," he suggested.

"Only I don' wanter sleep," she answered.

"Lie down, anyway."

"What you goneter do?"

"I'm going to cover you up."

"And then?"

"I'm going to think, Roxie. I'm going to think hard."

"Here?"

"Here beside you."

"All right."

She lay down prone upon her back and he covered her as he might have covered a child.

"You'll save one blanket for yuhself?" she asked.

"I don't need any."

"Please. It'll be cold afore mornin'."

To quiet her he threw one over his shoulders and resumed his place near her. She reached for his hand, found it, and grasped one finger. So she thought she held him safe.

It was well enough for her to think so during those next few hours. It brought her comfort and did no harm to any one. Yet, tight as she gripped that finger, he—though she did not know it—instantly slipped away. She had no more of him than a few hours before Bud had had of her.

But it was the feel of her warm hand that made Allston realize that the difference between life and death is not so crudely simple as the difference between mobility and immobility. That distinction satisfied the God of War. He was content with incapacity. Ineffectiveness was death. He even preferred total disability because it turned a man from an asset into a liability, though still able to feel and to think.

But the God of Peace, when He marked a man, did not stop here. He demanded annihilation. With the body must go all the emotions and all the thoughts. A man to be dead must be dead all

over — must be resolved into his elements. Nothing must be left of him on this planet except a memory. And that faded as rapidly as an unfinished print.

Allston did not propose to submit to any such programme without a struggle. Before such a contingency every sense became doubly acute. He was as alert to sounds as a squirrel. He jumped at every creak, not in fear, but in readiness. The automatic in his hand responded subconsciously, finding direction with sureness. His eyes pierced the dark so that he saw even into the far corners of the room where before he could not see. Once a rat crept out of the hallway and before he knew what he was about Allston had fired — and killed. Roxie sprang up quivering from head to foot, and it took him ten minutes to quiet her.

But if Allston was alert to the present, he was even more alert to the future. His thoughts ran ahead like galloping horses in response to the call of new needs. He had, all these years, merely scratched the surface while he thought he had been digging deep into the very bowels of the earth. Before he was out of college he had in an

academic way been ready to grapple with life. On top of that he had, through war, been brought into deadly contact with life itself—with what he had considered the big basic elements of existence. He had been plunged from poetry into prose. So he had completed the cycle. There was little left for him to know. His own problem was to classify and card-index his wide experiences—to put them in order for use.

Only one element had been left out of the past few years—a relatively unimportant element. That was the element of love—a distinctly peace-time element. He had even touched upon that superficially. And he had more or less expected to go into it more fully at his leisure. But not until the noise of the big guns was out of his ears; not until the ghastly realities had faded away; not until the little mounds had flattened down and the trenches been filled in; not, in brief, until—if ever—he was able to get away from actuality into that pleasant poet's paradise of dreams. There would be time enough then for the pretty drama of love.

So he had thought of it. So he had stepped forward lightly to meet the little winged cherub.

So he had challenged him to shoot his swiftest and straightest. Even after he had felt the first sting of the dart, he had smiled on. The wound smarted, but it was by no means serious.

Then this night had come—the second act of a whimsical Barrie comedy. There was heightened action at the rise of the curtain, but that might be significant or not. He had held himself ready to laugh at any moment. As the scene progressed, it had not been as easy, but still he would have followed any cue Wilmer had given him up to the moment she lighted her candle and disappeared for the night.

The succeeding scenes followed quickly, and they had ranged from melodrama to genuine tragedy, all based on this one theme of love. Not, however, love as he had conceived it. This had been no affair for winged cherubs to indulge in. And it had ceased to be a play. It was too serious—too grimly real for that. This had been a man's game. And a woman's game, too. But the stakes were terribly high.

Sitting there in the corner of this darkened shack waiting for the dawn (which for all he knew might turn out to be night), with this other

palpitating human being so curiously involved with him, Allston began to sense something of what love really is. As he vibrated to the dynamic power of this mighty force, he began to sense something of what life really is. And the two were one.

The two were one; that was the full significance of both love and life. A man floundered on trying to separate the inseparable until he discovered this. Neither prose nor poetry; reality nor dreams; man nor woman, had any real existence apart from the other. When they did unite, their potentiality was akin to that of God. Out of that union came all the big things that are; came life itself.

Concretely this meant for Allston that woman with whom he had been in such light contact during these last few weeks. It meant Wilmer Howe. And yet it did not mean the Wilmer who in her pretty setting had been acting her dainty comedy—the idyl of the winged cherub—but the real woman back of her; the woman of flesh and blood whom for a few brief seconds he had felt when he grasped her hand; the woman who was, if she was at all, in the secrecy of her room.

And how he hungered for her now in this crisis! How, had she been near, he would have dragged her out of herself — brutally if necessary! How, had she been as close to him as this other was, he would have covered her hair and forehead with kisses, kisses both sacred and burning. His lips grew hot and dry at thought of it.

Roxie opened her drowsy eyes.

"Yer warm enough?" she asked with the tenderness of a cooing dove.

Allston started.

"Yes," he answered.

"I feel 's though I was goin' asleep."

"That 's the best thing you could do," he replied.

"I 've dreamed a dream like this," she smiled gently.

"You might as well keep on dreaming — till morning."

That was the best thing she could do. And he was entitled to his dreams, too, until morning. So he gave himself up to them riotously, but with his eyes wide open and his brain clear — as though they were not dreams at all. It was as though Wilmer had come to him here and made

herself an integral part of him — blending into him until she became one with him.

It was Roxie who was dreaming. Her eyes were closed and her breathing regular. Yet from time to time she stirred uneasily in her sleep. Then Allston, fearing lest she take cold, slipped the blanket from his shoulders and threw it over her — very gently so that she would not awake. Her face in repose appeared even younger. It was quite untroubled. He thanked God for that. If only she were sleeping safe in her own bed as she should be!

Allston became aware of the approaching dawn even before there was light. The wind died down so that it was quite still all about the shack. But within, the air became fresher with the clearness of atomized spring water. When the light did begin to come, it came subtly. It was more as though the dark were being diluted. Without moving, Allston watched the process with weird fascination. He wished the girl to sleep as long as that was safe, but he knew this could not be for long. The sun was coming up behind those dark ridges, and it was only a question of a very brief time when it would enter here and leave them

as exposed as though the wall of the shack were torn down. Every window would be a menace. There would not be a corner left in which they could hide.

He did not wish to hide. Light was what he was waiting for — light that would allow Bud to distinguish between him and Roxie. Only he must time himself nicely; it must be clear enough not to permit of any mistake on Bud's part, but not clear enough to allow the man to shoot through the windows.

On the shelf over the fireplace there was a row of crocks. As soon as he was able to count these, Allston would rouse the girl. That time came within five minutes. He made out four of them — one, two, three, four. He placed his hand on Roxie's head and whispered her name. She started to her feet, staring about wildly.

"Steady," whispered Allston. "It's morning."

The girl was confused. It was difficult for her to grasp the situation.

"Listen," he commanded. "I'm going out before he can see us here. It's the only way. You're to stay behind until I get across the clearing. Then you follow. You'll be safe."

"I'll be safe!" she cried. "But you?"

"I must take my chances."

"Then I wanter take mine — with yuh."

"You'll only spoil mine," he frowned. "I can get across there alone, and once in the woods I'll wait for you. Straight from the house and across the road. You understand?"

"No-o-," she whimpered.

"If he tries to stop you, I'll have him covered. Straight across and into the woods."

Already the crocks on the shelf were becoming too visible.

"You've been game till now; be game to the end," he whispered.

Beseechingly she stood before him with uplifted face. He stooped and brushed her forehead.

"God bless you — whatever happens," he choked.

Then, before she could catch her breath, he swung open the door and, crouching a little, dashed out. He had not gone ten feet before a rifle cracked from the spring-house.

Allston crumpled up like an empty sack.

CHAPTER XXII

It was half-past nine when Wilmer left Allston alone in front of the open fire and went upstairs. And though it was after midnight before she fell asleep, she had not then heard his footsteps along the hall. She had listened, too, rather closely. The man had been in her thoughts every minute since she bade him good-night and retreated to her room. Her abrupt and somewhat inhospitable departure was a retreat—nothing less. She had been neither weary, sleepy, nor bored. In fact, she had retired at a moment when she had felt herself more than usually alert and alive both mentally and physically—more alive than she felt it either discreet or safe to be. When a carefully nurtured and intelligent young woman finds herself prompted to such intimate acts of tenderness as smoothing back the hair from the forehead of a man she has lately chided for being too boldly impulsive, it would seem to be high time for her to remove herself out of danger even though that involves a humiliating confession. It was no argument either that because his hair was

light and all awry, it appeared like the hair of a boy; or that because his face was troubled, her tenderness was justified on purely humanitarian grounds. Besides, she had considered nothing of the sort. She had wished to do it because some newly roused instinct craved satisfaction in just that way.

There was no use in lying. That was both cowardly and useless. If there were mortal sin here this was no way of ridding one's self of it. One should probe for causes. That is what the intellect is for. The ability to do this or not is what distinguishes between the intelligent and the unintelligent.

Well, then, the reason she had wished to smooth back the hair from Allston's forehead was because — she had wished to do it. He was worried and she held herself partly responsible. She could not help this. She had tried to be honest both with him and herself — to speak the truth as she saw it. But having done this she was sorry because it had not helped to dissipate his perplexity. It had only more deeply involved them both. Words had been unavailing. It was then that this strangely primitive impulse had asserted

itself. Her warm hand urged her to express what her tongue could not.

She had conquered the temptation. That is a woman's lot; to conquer and conquer and conquer. Given emotions more acute than those of men, she is asked to control them more completely. If she does not, she is never forgiven. She has betrayed her trust.

She had conquered the physical impulse, but that was all. Alone here in her room she knew that. The old tenderness returned — the tenderness that sought expression in action. And after all perhaps it was not so strange. Men have always sought and women always given this tangible proof of their feelings. Down through the years a woman has spoken her heart through the touch of her hand and lips. Speech has been left for men.

In her room with the dark all around her, Wilmer allowed herself to relax somewhat. But vigilance is the eternal price of liberty in more senses than one. The moment she permitted her thoughts to wander where they would, they went where she would not. Only once before had she felt herself the victim of this unseen power, and

the man who was responsible now lay dead at Château-Thierry.

She had been younger then. Over twenty, every year counts double in a woman's life until she reaches full maturity. Her youth had been an excuse where now it no longer was. And yet she doubted if at twenty she would have had to fight so hard for control. Her emotions were feebler then.

To add to her confusion she was not at all sure what it was she was trying to repulse. There is so much vagueness in a young woman's life; so much hinted at, but never made clear; so much guessed, but not known. It is probably true that they are more of a mystery to themselves than to the young men who look upon them with such awe. It was certainly true of Wilmer in spite of all her reading.

No two authorities seemed to her able to agree on this thing called love; whether it was something to welcome or something to be guarded against. Before Allston came along she had been inclining to the latter view, for it appeared to lead more often to unhappiness than to happiness. Most tragedies were born of love; the great trage-

dies as well as the sordid little ones. In most cases woman was the victim, and when not, most certainly deserved to be. The good women suffered to themselves; the bad women caused others to suffer.

If this were true, then love was something to be fought off like an evil spirit. But the trouble was that instead of gaining strength as she struggled, as in other contests of her life, she felt her resistance to be constantly weakening. The more she argued, the feebler became her arguments; the more bitterly she condemned herself, the more ardently she desired. Hour by hour her intellect had been giving way to her emotions. She was becoming, looking at it in one way, less and less intelligent in her attitude to this burning problem.

And yet if her slow retreat did not bring her back into safer territory, it left her on more familiar ground. Forced to her base, she found that base to be her heart. And her heart was more peculiarly herself than her mind.

There are, in every woman, two women; the one coolly, calmly, deliberately, intelligently formed, and within her another, often enough im-

prisoned for life, the creation of God. Shyly the latter sits in silence peeping as she finds her opportunity through the eyes — safe hidden in the eyes — or makes her presence felt through a touch of the hand or, in full power, through the lips. And this woman grows and grows if given half a chance. If not she sickens and dies — pathetically, tragically. And what is left after that may be admirable, but does not win admiration.

It was face to face with this other self that Wilmer now found herself — an elfish, wholly irresponsible self, although governed by something bigger even than thought. And when the word love reached this other, it was as though she sprang into radiantly full being. Flushed and palpitating, eyes brimming with daring and eagerness, she asserted herself. She was Youth with all the hardy qualities of youth; she was Life with all the adventurous enthusiasm of life; she was Womanhood with all the steady courage of womanhood. She asked no questions, but she whispered secrets.

She whispered secrets to Wilmer lying there in the dark — big secrets, holy secrets, quickening

secrets. She spoke of love quite fearlessly — at times almost fiercely. With eyes that were like the blazing sun, with nostrils that quivered, with a mouth opened for frank laughter, she challenged the world to deny her.

And Wilmer, her pretty white arm thrown over her forehead, stared and marveled until finally her eyes grew heavy and she slipped away into a dream world.

She awoke at dawn. She started to her elbow to listen once again for the footsteps of Allston. The house was silent — the utter silence of early morning. She realized then that she must have slept and that he had passed her door during that interval. She fell back to her pillow, but her eyes remained wide open. She had a feeling that something had happened in the last few hours — something big. It is so one awakes after joyous news, unable for a second to recall it. The emotion remains, but unrelated. Then suddenly she remembered, and her face became as radiant as the face of that other woman. She *was* that other woman — that heart woman. In her dreams, love had taken possession.

She sprang from bed, and crossing to the open

window looked out at the dawn. The quickening sky greeted her like a sister. The east was still a silver gray, but it looked so fresh and clean and cool that impulsively she threw out her arms towards it. So she did towards all the trees and grasses, though they were still half hidden in the dark. There were shadows there, too, but they were friendly shadows. She did not fear them in the least. They called to her to come out under the sky and be refreshed like them.

She felt cramped here in her room. She wished to be part of the dawn. And so dressing quickly she stole downstairs to the sitting-room. The fire was out, but the chair in which Allston had sat was still in its place before the cold hearth. Her hand fell upon it caressingly. It had become individualized to her. There were other chairs in the room of similar design, but these were merely so many indifferent pieces of wicker furniture. This was his chair. This would always be his chair.

She moved across the room to find a wrap, and when opposite the door leading into the kitchen was stopped by a draft as from an open window. That was unusual because her father was rather

finicky about having the house tight-locked at night, and Roxie knew this. For a moment she hesitated. It was not yet full day, but she could see well enough to distinguish objects within. Perhaps Roxie was up. She often rose early.

Wilmer ventured to the threshold and called the girl's name. She received no response, but she saw then it was not a window but the outside door that was open. It affected her as something dramatic. Nothing can be more significant than a door open when it should be closed or closed when it should be open. It involves a human element that may mean much.

On the whole, Wilmer was now sorry she had come down here. She was no more than ordinarily timid, but there is something unnatural about a house before it has awakened. The silence, for one thing, is intensive. One feels like an intruder, and like an intruder is never sure of what one may stumble upon. The night things do not vanish except before direct rays of either sun or lamp.

Finally, with considerable effort, she crossed the kitchen and hurriedly closed the door — with an odd feeling, before it latched, that something

from without might resist her efforts. She was left a little out of breath. Which was absurd, of course. She realized this as soon as she had turned the lock.

But now the dead stove and the dumb kettle and the silent pots and pans hanging all around oppressed her. A kitchen is a living thing expressed in terms of noise and movement. When it is quiet and still, it is out of character. Moreover, it emphasized the absence of Roxie. She was always here, or at least some evidence of her.

Wilmer listened for her footsteps overhead. She ought by now to be dressing. The first feeble chirps of the early birds could be heard outside and she always rose with them. It was not necessary for her to get up at this hour, but she always did.

A peculiar sense of loneliness swept over Wilmer. She felt suddenly conscious of being the only live thing about in the house. She wished to see Roxie — to hear another human voice. It was this which impelled her up the stairs to the girl's door. It was closed and she heard no movement within. She rapped gently and received no response. Then she turned the knob and gently

pressed the door open. Her eyes sought the bed. It was empty.

And in the center of the room there stood one shoe and beside it a bit of paper. She picked up the note and hurrying to the window read it. Her heart stopped beating for a moment. Roxie had gone. Reading between the lines as clearly as Allston had done, she knew with whom. But there were some other things between the lines, clear enough to Allston, which she did not understand.

Clutching the crumpled bit of paper, Wilmer came back to the sitting-room. When the note had been written, she had no way of knowing, but the undisturbed bed indicated that it was the evening before. Roxie was generally asleep by ten. She had been gone, then, some seven hours. But why had she left at such an hour if with Bud? She had heard the girl in the kitchen until after nine, and that was too late for the completion of even a runaway match. There was an element of the inexplicable here which urged her to seek Allston at once. And, besides, she wanted him for herself.

Here was an emergency demanding action,

and she turned to this man as naturally as, a day ago, she would have turned to her father. As soon as this, he had slipped into place by her side. He was there to help whenever she needed help. And he was there in a more vital sense than ever her father had been. If the latter was a wise counselor, he also stood in need of counsel; if a protector, he also was often in need of protection. If he was her right hand, she was his left hand.

But Allston stood out full-bodied, by himself. He needed no assistance. He could relieve her wholly of such a responsibility as this.

And yet, as she made her way up the stairs and down the hallway to his room, she began to question. To give him this note was to rouse him. To place this situation before him was to lead him into danger. For he would follow Roxie. There was no doubt about that. He would follow until he learned whether the girl had entered upon this mad venture of her own volition or not. That involved a terrible risk.

Wilmer, a few feet from his door, paused, leaning against the wall for support. If she waited a few hours, then he might seek help on his mission.

A dozen men from the village would be willing to accompany him on such an errand. With the house surrounded, Bud would be forced to explain or to surrender.

But if Roxie were in actual danger, then a few hours might mark the difference between life and death, between honor and dishonor.

It was a cruel dilemma in which to place a woman in so brief a time after she had awakened to the full realization of love. It made little difference that her love had not yet been confessed — even that she had no assurance that it would be reciprocated. Once she had made the admission to herself, it existed — even if she lived the rest of her years with lips tight sealed. To her it was a reality at this moment — a stupendous reality. She loved as only a woman can love who has fought against love. It burned within her now like a white-hot flame.

In the end her decision was based, not upon Roxie, but upon herself and the man she loved. To be true to that love, she must send him; to be true to that love, he must go. If this new-found passion meant anything, it meant being true to the highest; it meant willingness to sacrifice to

the highest. If she quailed before such a clean-cut issue as this, she could never again respect that love; if she saved him at such a cost, she could never respect that which she had saved.

With head up, if with knees weak, she knocked at his door. And as she did so it was as though not her hand but her naked heart were beating against the wooden panels. The ache of it made her tremble. To add to the agony she was forced to do it again—and yet again. The silence following hurt, too. It raised new fears. These accumulated so rapidly that she was soon in a panic. Scarcely conscious of what she was about, she turned the knob and pushed open his door—standing back as she did so. Light is indifferent. It cares not what it reveals. It showed now with grim starkness Allston's empty, untouched bed.

And a vacant room.

CHAPTER XXIII

The fact that Allston had gone last night and had not yet returned was as convincing proof to Wilmer of some mishap to him as a direct message would have been. Had he accomplished his purpose, he would have been back within three hours — four at the most. Such undertakings are decided quickly. When two strong men meet in mountain country over such an issue, the argument is not long-drawn-out. And the end is apt to be definite.

So for a moment the girl stared at the empty bed as one stares helplessly at the jerky telegrams on yellow paper that are brutally thrust into one's life. Direct blows between the eyes these, which stun. And however grimly concrete the news, it is difficult to understand because it comes through such a thin medium. All is well — then a bit of yellow paper — and all is over.

Wilmer did not have even as much as a written report; just an opened door and silence. But if the message had been written in burning letters of fire or shouted at her through a megaphone, it

could have told her no more. He had gone to meet Bud Childers and he had not come back.

Dazed as the girl was, she held herself well. Facing the little things about his room, she stood straight as though facing something of him. His courage called for her courage. Whatever had happened to him, she knew he had accepted like a man, so that whatever had happened, she must accept like a woman. If some of the color vanished from her cheeks that was not her fault. She could not control this. But she could control her trembling lips and did. Turning from the room, she found her way back downstairs and to the sitting-room. There she saw again his chair —the chair in which he had sat last evening. For a second she tottered. All the little things of him seemed so doubly important now. Every suggestion of him was so vital. It might be—it might be that this was all she had left; traces at a moment when she hungered for a hundred times more than she had ever had when within arm's length of him.

She pronounced his name below her breath. Just this—

"Ned."

Then louder as though the name itself could bring him nearer.

"Ned," she called. "Ned."

She received no answer. The man who had been here yesterday — who would have responded to her lightest whisper — did not count. And if he could have answered as of yesterday, that would not have counted. It was to-day — now — that she wanted him. It was this minute — this second. She wanted him to come to her and place his arms about her and hold her tight; she wanted the feel of his lips and the sound of his voice. She wanted him in the flesh with all his tousled light hair. She was empty without him — as empty as a mother with an unweighted arm.

Tears started to her hot eyes, and, burying her face in her hands, she knelt before the wicker chair as before a sacred shrine.

"God, give him back to me," she pleaded. "I want him. I want him so."

If all the prayers of women were answered, perhaps there would be no need of other prayers. How many go trembling up through the day and through the night!

Wilmer rose again to her feet — steadied and

strengthened. It may be that this is the most direct and best answer God can give — strength to endure, strength to act. She moved towards the kitchen — towards the door she had found opened. It was as though this were the beginning of the trail leading to his side. She had no preconceived plan, but her feet took her here. This was the path Roxie had taken; the path Ned Allston had taken. It was the path she must take.

Her heart leaped in response to the suggestion. She must follow him. If he could not come to her, she must go to him. In essence the idea was foreign to her nature. She was neither bold nor venturesome. Ordinarily she would have turned to her father, but now this never occurred to her. He played no part in this early morning drama. He slept and he must sleep on. This did not concern him. It concerned her alone — that inner woman who in a sense had never had a father.

The drawer of the kitchen table was open — pulled far out. Her eyes caught the gray sheen of steel. She had never seen these articles except as so many cooking-utensils. But they were more than that; they were weapons. They were knives.

And knives were for both defense and offense. She crossed the room and picked out one—a thin-bladed, pointed knife worn down by much use. She thrust this into her bosom and returned to the door. She unlocked it, swung it open, and went out into the dew-wet grass.

The cool of the unwarmed dawn air which met her hot skin and bathed her eyes and refreshed her dry throat as she drank it deep into her lungs, braced her like wine. Down the serpentine drive she went walking with long, steady strides, unhurried in spite of her excited heart and with chin well up. She wore no hat; no coat. She needed none. Her brown hair, which had not been as carefully arranged as usual this morning, soon fell loose until it hung all about her flushed cheeks gypsy-wise. Had any one glimpsed her, he would surely have thought it Roxie who was abroad at such an hour. For though taller she was walking with that rhythmic swing, all from the hips down, which only those acquire who have lived long in mountain country and walked much. And her feet were sure on the rocky ground.

The sky grew pink in the east, but she saw it

not. Birds began to stir and sing among the wet leaves, but she heard them not. Squirrels began to chatter — squirrels she loved to stop and tease — but she gave no heed to them. As far as she was concerned this colorful, vibrant world about her was as desolate as the moon surface. Her thoughts were all of the man towards whom she was speeding.

She knew this road well. It was the same she had taken with him after that adventure in the sunlit cove which lay so near the mountain path leading to Bud's shack. She had laughed at her father's fears when the latter warned them to avoid that neighborhood. How trivial that whole incident now seemed to her, and yet it had played its part. It was playing its part now. It was leading her with sure feet to his side.

But what was she going to find after she reached his side? It was a question she fought off. And yet, batlike, the question returned to circle again and again around her thoughts.

Leaving the sandy road that skirted the lower end of the valley, her course took her upwards on a trail rough as a stream-bed. It ran like a tunnel through the dark of crowding trees. Laurel and

rhododendron and sourwood in a snarling tangle beneath beech and oak pressed close, as though bent upon obliterating this rough gash hacked through their fastness. Overhead the dark branches came together and shut out the sun. It was damp and shaded here and the pungent smell of the earth met her as though she were burrowing. She hurried a little up the steep path with an uncanny feeling that if she delayed too long she might be enveloped. The growing things might seize her, might twine their snaky limbs about her and force her down into this same earth from which they sprang. And the earth was cold and damp. She wanted none of it. She began to feel stifled, and broke into a panic-stricken run that took the breath out of her. Halfway up she had to stop. But she refused to sit down. She did not dare sit down. She stood in the center of the road, her head upturned, her eyes trying to pierce the green canopy above. With her hands hanging limply by her side, she breathed through her mouth because her nostrils did not furnish enough air. Had any one come upon her so, he would have thought her some wild thing fleeing from the hunters.

Up she climbed and up where the dawn did not reach before high noon; up and up and up. Until she saw the end of the tunnel. Then, breaking into a run again, she never stopped until she plunged out upon the top where man had fought the trees to the death and left a summit of upland pasture open to the sky, and made rich farmland covered with blue grass dotted with grazing cattle. She felt like a diver coming up from deep, brackish water. She threw herself prone on her back for a moment, her eyes fixed on the wide expanse of clean blue sky, shot with gold up here. Below her lay the crescent-shaped valley—a picture so serenely peaceful in contrast to what she had just come through that only the psalmist could adequately express it. The lines though unspoken came to her lips:

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me."

All her life she had uttered these words without any appreciation save of their rhythmic beauty. Now they were like a voice from the sky itself. They quenched, like cold water, the fever

in her veins. They lent a significance to that beautiful valley below which she was never to forget. They made of it, for all time, a resting-place.

But she could not pause here. She kept the road along the ridge-top until she passed the Lutheran church, and then turned down the mountain-side again — into the dark forest again. The valley was behind her now; but it was there. When she faltered she closed her eyes and recalled it — the golden warmth of it and the serene promise of it. It helped her mightily over that last mile; helped her as she dipped down towards Big Laurel Cove — towards the dragon country. It was so she felt — like the lost maidens of the fairy books in the creepy land of devouring monsters. She was terrified, but under some spell she staggered on. The strain of the four miles was beginning to tell on her legs. And the tension was beginning to tell on her thoughts. She became more and more a prey to the vagaries of her excited imagination. A squirrel leaping from one bending oak branch to another made her start and clutch at her knife — the knife which all the way had lain like a bony hand against her white bosom.

Then the clearing before Bud's shack and the log crossing the stream, and beyond it—the crumpled form of Allston. She saw it from the roadway and took the last hundred yards in a series of bounding leaps like some frantic wild animal.

CHAPTER XXIV

At the sharp, staccato crack of Bud's rifle Roxie had sprung from the cabin. She was out before Allston fell. But as he fell, she fell too. Her legs gave way and a dark cloud settled down upon her and she knew no more.

From the rear of the spring-house Bud uttered an oath. For a second he thought he had made some dreadful mistake; that his bullet had gone home to her. Yet there in a heap and quite motionless lay Allston. His automatic had dropped from his lifeless fingers and fallen several feet away — quite out of reach. There was no shamming in that pose.

But also, prone, lay Roxie. There was no shamming in her pose either. She had fallen face downward. Bud reloaded and ventured forth, his eyes first on Allston and then on Roxie. But strange to say he was more afraid to approach the latter than the former. Halfway to her side he stood motionless with the deepest, blackest fear he had ever known upon him. Fear had him by the throat — was strangling him with fiercer

passion than Allston had done. His arms grew limp and his rifle dropped.

He tottered forward, stopped, and went on again. Then the last ten feet he took at a run and knelt by her side. He turned her over. She did not resist. She was as passive as a child's rag doll. And her face was white — chalky white. His eyes sought her bodice near the heart. There was no crimson stain there. That was what he had feared. He felt her hands. They were cold, but he caught a slow pulse-beat. It was as though he had been released from chains. She was not dead, and that was enough.

Rising, Bud glanced at Allston. He looked at him as he might a dead branch — with no more pity, with no more regret. The damned furriner's cheeks were not as pink as they had once been. He had shot true this time.

A squirrel chattered. Bud came to alert. This was the end in one sense, but it was only the beginning in another. This man was motionless, but his very immobility brought a new danger. He would lie there one hour, two hours, perhaps three hours. He would make no sound. He would not move a finger. And yet all the while he

would be calling — calling with a voice that might be heard throughout the county. The dead are not as helpless as they seem. Allston would be missed, in time, down at the bungalow. Some one would wonder where he was and go to a neighbor and make him wonder too. They would go together to a third neighbor until the hue and cry was raised. Then they would all swarm up here together.

Bud's wild eyes turned to the shack. He could not stay in there. However tight he might bar the doors, the searchers would beat them down. His home was no longer his home. He had killed more things than one when he shot from behind the spring-house.

But at that he had not killed everything. He himself was still alive and Roxie was still alive. And back of him lay the hills still alive — the tangled hills that he knew as a squirrel knows them. Once in their shelter he would still have some sort of chance. With Roxie by his side he might have hours — even days — days that would count for years.

Bud went back and picked up his rifle. He would need that now more than ever. Moving

swiftly and definitely, he entered the shack and spreading a blanket on the floor hastily tossed into it the tinned goods he had lately bought, a small bag of flour, a can of coffee, some sugar, salt, a frying-pan, and coffee pot. Drawing the four corners together he tied them in a knot and throwing the bundle over his shoulder came out.

Allston still lay on the ground quite motionless. So too did Roxie. But there was a difference —a significant difference. As far as Bud was concerned, Allston now stood only for the past, while Roxie still stood for the future. Until death the future persists in full strength, whatever limitations are put around it.

Bud stooped and placed his hands upon the girl. Her body was warm and the touch of it magnetized him. Lifting her easily he swung her upon his back, her head and arms over his right shoulder. So for hours he had carried burdens heavier than she. His provisions and rifle he seized in his left hand. With long, noiseless strides, he crossed the log to the road, turned to the right, and began to climb the rocky trail.

Straying tendrils of the girl's light hair brushed his cheeks as bending forward he bore her up-

wards and away — away from the silent form in his yard, away from the valley and all its folks below, away from the invisible hand of the law which would soon be reaching for him. And with that loose hair against his rough cheeks, the strength of ten men was in him. With it came a new defiance. They might turn out the whole county after him, but before they caught him he would be in the next county. They might turn out the whole State to hound him, but he would cross the mountains — mountain after mountain if necessary — until he reached the next State. There were no limits to his horizon now. He was anchored by neither shack nor farm. They could take them both and be damned, but they would travel far before they took him or his woman. For all he knew, these hills and this forest continued indefinitely. A man could live in them indefinitely. And when they could not furnish him with what he needed, why, there were always settlements where a man with a rifle could secure what he wished.

The higher Bud climbed, the less he had any consciousness of being a fugitive. It was more as though all his life he had been a prisoner and had

just found freedom. His contact with civilization had done nothing but force upon him a series of inhibitions. Some one was always interfering with his rights. He was pulling away from all that.

Where a small stream crossed the road, he turned sharp left into the woods. He was becoming impatient even with man-made paths. He followed the edge of the cut made by the running water, forcing his way through the bushes, sweeping aside the growth ahead of him with his long arm. Not a twig touched her face. Not a branch whipped her body.

He was well out of the beaten track before any sign of consciousness began to return to the girl. The first indication she gave was something like a sigh and a feeble attempt to raise her head. Her eyes even then remained closed. And she made no struggle. But at once Bud lowered her to the leaf-strewn ground and went to the brook for water. Scooping up as much as his cupped hands would hold he returned and moistened her lips and bathed her forehead. The effect came quicker than he anticipated. Her eyes opened wide and she struggled to her elbow.

"Hit 's only me, Roxie," he said gently.

It was only he. And as he spoke the words they were tempered with love. Through his steel-gray eyes there shone something of the gentle blue of the sky peering through the upper branches of the trees. It was only he. Big and brutal and coarse-featured and merciless as he was, there was the tenderness of a woman in his touch. Before her it was only he—only Bud. And had there been need he would have held out his right arm and drained into her veins every drop of his blood.

"I don't aim ter bother yuh," he went on as she remained dumb. "Hit 's only me."

Big-eyed, half fearing what she would find, Roxie was fumbling around among her confused thoughts trying to account for her presence here. Bud Childers—he had come to the bungalow for her. She had gone with him. Then Allston—the night—the dawn—the crack of a rifle! Weakly she sank back, throwing her arm over her eyes as though to shut out some terrible sight. For a moment she almost fell back into a pit of darkness. Allston had fallen. She had seen him fall. She had started to his side, and then—and then—

She scrambled to her knees staring in terror at the man before her.

"Whar's Mister Allston?" she panted.

Bud's face grew dark.

"Over thar," he answered grimly with a nod back of his head down the mountain.

"You—you shot him! You—you killed him!" she cried.

"Well?" he drawled vaguely.

Still on her knees she began to crawl away from the man.

"You—you devil!" she choked.

"He come up thar and no one axed him," he said.

"And you killed him—a-hidin' behin' the spring-house like a yaller dawg, you killed a *man!*"

There was the cut of a knife in every word she spoke. He winced, but his lips grew thin and hard. And all the blue vanished from the gray eyes.

"'Pears like yo're takin' et kinder hard—him a furriner."

As he spoke his eyes narrowed until his bushy brows almost met.

"Him a furriner," he repeated in a voice that was like the low growl of a mountain cat.

"Him a *man!*" burst out Roxie.

"It was him er me," said Bud. "An' I didn' go atter him. He come up hyar."

"He come up hyar," nodded Roxie with a quick, gasping intake of breath. "He come up hyar. You wanter know how he come to come up hyar, Bud Childers? It was 'cause he keered more 'bout me than he keered 'bout hisself. Thet 's the truth, Bud Childers, ef yuh want the truth. Thet 's the kind o' man he was."

"An' you — you keered 'bout him?"

She lifted her face at that — lifted it and met Bud eye to eye:

"Keered?" she choked. "Keered? Oh, my Gawd!"

With that her head began to sink, her lips to quiver, and though she fought hard she could no longer control the tears. Her hands before her face she bowed low, racked by sobs that shook her to the depths.

With his rifle across his knees Bud sat down and watched her. He removed his old black hat and ran his hand across his perspiring forehead — slowly as though in bewilderment.

CHAPTER XXV

A MAN may look dead, and yet by no means be dead; a man may be very close to the borderland of death, and yet, if he has not actually crossed, may be dragged back by the strong hands of love. Bud Childers's bullet had not found Allston's heart. The shot had gone high and a little wild. Striking to the right of his head, it had cut a gash across his temple—a gash which had been covered as he fell. But the impact of the bullet against his skull had stunned him and dropped him in his tracks. That was his good fortune, for otherwise a second shot, better directed, would most certainly have followed.

Allston had fallen. The curtain had been rung down. For all he knew it was final. And yet in the course of time the curtain began to rise again. Light—the emblem of life—filtered through his eyes and made itself a conscious fact in his half-paralyzed brain. That was all he was aware of at first—just light; a pale, cold light like that of dawn. It was quite meaningless and without

warmth. It roused no emotions in him; little interest. It just was; nothing more.

Yet because it was, it indicated life. It stood for continuation instead of the end. It meant another day. It meant being. It meant—

Something more was trying to get through to that numbed brain of his. Another sense was fluttering to life—sound. He heard a far-off noise. Then, it seemed close to his ear. It was whispering a familiar name. It was his name.

"Ned," he heard. And then once more, "Ned."

It roused him to effort. He tried to move his arm. Quickly following this, he began to feel; something warm was resting on his forehead smoothing back his hair. Something still warmer brushed his cold lips. Then, like a film unfolding its secrets in a dark room, his mind began to clear. Objects became more concrete. They stood for something. This was a woman bending over him. Still somewhat hazy he tried to raise his head. As he did so he heard a sharp cry. The ugly wound stood revealed.

"Ned," came the trembling voice. "Lie still. I—I must get water."

Then he knew. That was Wilmer Howe. That

was Wilmer Howe. They were in the cove where he had stopped to fish for trout. No, there was something wrong about that. This was a clearing. He rose to one elbow. His hair and cheek felt sticky, and he put up his hand. He brought it back crimsoned. He saw the shack beyond and the whole story flashed before him.

His head sank to the ground. He seemed to be weak. Bud had got him when he started to run from the door. But how happened it that Wilmer had taken the place of Roxie? This was strange —very strange. It was not easy to think about anything very long at a time.

He heard footsteps running towards him. Again he tried to sit up, but before he could do that Wilmer was by his side. She was holding a tin dipper to his lips. He drank thirstily. It was very refreshing—this clear, ice-cold spring water. She poured a little into the palm of her hand and bathed his forehead and face. He struggled again to sit up and, with her help, succeeded. He was facing the log shack. His hand went back to his pocket.

"Where—where's my gun?" he demanded.

Wilmer had thought of themselves as alone.

Both Bud and Roxie had been eliminated from her thoughts. Now she raised her eyes and glanced about.

Allston caught sight of his automatic on the ground a few feet away. He tried to reach it and failed. Following his outstretched arm, she saw it too, and, picking it up gingerly, handed it to him. The feel of it in his fingers roused him to action in spite of his weakness. He squinted towards the shack.

"Lord!" he said. "You shouldn't be here, Wilmer. Childers may — may be in there. He may be in the woods."

He wanted to make his feet now. He tried and failed.

"What's the matter with my darned legs?" he stammered petulantly.

"You've been hurt," she explained gently. "Please — please to sit still."

"But that devil — it isn't safe for you here, I tell you."

"You think he may be inside?"

"He might be. Where's Roxie?"

"I — I haven't seen any one but — but you."

"Then — can't you help me stand up?"

"It's better for you not to move."

"I've got to get in there and — find out."

The girl's face was very white and tense. She was kneeling by his side, but she suddenly rose. Then she took the gun from his weak fingers.

"I'll see!" she exclaimed.

Before he could catch her skirts she was moving across the few yards of clear space to the door. He called after her. With every ounce of strength left in him he tried to follow, but apparently he had lost a good deal of blood. His legs were like limp straws. Helpless he saw her disappear through the door. She was not gone long, but it seemed an eternity before she came out again.

"The house is empty," she said.

"Thank God. If it hadn't been —"

"But it is. And if — can you get across there, leaning on me?"

The color was returning to his cheeks; the light to his eyes.

"Leaning on you," he repeated slowly, "I — I think I could get anywhere."

"Then —"

She bent down and placed an arm beneath his

shoulder. As he moved she lifted and so got him, tottering, to his feet. He stood so for a moment with his arm over her frail shoulder. He did not seem to wish to move farther.

"I can build a fire," she ran on. "It's cold out here. You can walk a little?"

Then he said, as though to himself:

"You oughtn't to be here."

He tried to keep his weight from her as much as possible, but actually he did lean heavily. Even so her shoulders did not sag. Frail they looked—fit only for the burden of lace shawls—but they did not sag. His left arm was over them and her right arm around his waist supporting him. He felt the tight, steady grip of it. Even when he paused, this did not relax.

So he came back over that threshold which so brief a time ago he had crossed in the other direction; so he came back into that room where he had waited through the night. There was the corner where he had sat with Roxie. The tumbled blankets still lay on the floor. They cried out to him. They brought her name to his lips.

"Where's Roxie?"

"Steady," Wilmer answered. "Steady until we get to the chair."

She led him to a chair before the dead hearth. He slumped down wearily.

"She's gone," he said. "Bud must have got her."

"She was here, then?"

"Here with Bud Childers."

"But why—"

"Because the brute bullied her into coming. He threatened to get me—if she didn't come."

"Oh!" she cried. "And then?"

"I got *him*. I had him fair—tied hand and foot. But the beggar squirmed loose."

"And then?"

"Roxie wouldn't leave for fear of him."

"Then?"

"I took a chance—this morning. He was waiting behind the spring-house."

She shuddered at that.

"But she—she may have escaped."

"Yes. Only—women are queer," he answered in a voice scarcely audible.

Wilmer turned her head and smiled a little—to herself. Roxie was gone and Bud was gone.

But she was here and Ned Allston was here. And he was helpless — helpless enough to be dependent on her. Much of her fear had vanished. It was evident now that his wound, however painful, was not serious. The thing to do was to make him warm and comfortable until help arrived. That gave her an hour — perhaps two hours.

She started towards the door. His eyes were upon her.

"Where you going?" he demanded.

"I must kindle a fire."

He staggered to his feet.

"That's my job," he said.

She hurried to his chair.

"You'd help most if you'd sit still," she answered. "You only interrupt."

She waited until he reseated himself.

"I don't seem to have much strength," he muttered.

"And I have more than I ever had," she answered. "So you see it *ought* to be my job."

Women are queer, Allston had said. That is a very loose and very general statement, but there may be something in it. At any rate, it served as an explanation, as good as any, perhaps, of

why Wilmer found the unfamiliar tasks she now went about not only congenial, but distinctly exhilarating — even mentally stimulating. If she had ever kindled a fire, it was so long ago she had forgotten about it. And she would have been inclined to argue that it was so humbly simple an act that it was not worth remembering, anyway. It made no heavy call upon the intellect. In and of itself it was a trivial duty.

And yet, as she went to look for wood, she felt a pride in her mission out of all proportion to the effort. She was to build a fire — for him. She must make him warm. She must heat water and bathe his wound. If she could find provisions in the shack, she must prepare something for him to eat — if only a cup of tea or coffee. She must build up his strength.

His strength — the strength of the man she loved. She must give him some of her own strength and in this indirect way alone was that at the moment possible. It was too indirect to satisfy her — too simple. Could she have opened her veins into his veins, that would have seemed too simple. Perhaps this new need could never be satisfied by any one act — only by a succes-

sion of acts extending without limit through his life. It was as big as that.

But at any rate here was something — something definite and tangible calling for effort if only the picking up of chips. The very simplicity of the task hallowed it. The disciples grasped eagerly at the opportunity to express their great love through the anointing of His feet.

In the rear of the shack Wilmer found a woodpile and a dulled and rusty axe. Picking up this, she battered away at some of the driest pine until she had broken it into splinters. She was surprised at the power in her arms and back. She had never handled anything as heavy as this axe in her life, and yet she raised it easily and brought it down upon the stubborn dried limbs with sufficient force to accomplish her object. They broke in spite of their resistance. There is always satisfaction in victory even in so primitive a conflict as this. But back of this there was more; she was doing this for her man, even as Roxie might have done. She was using her muscles and hands for him. She was catering to his well-being and comfort.

With cheeks grown crimson by the effort, she

stopped and gathered an armful of the splinters, hugging them close to her bosom, careless of what they did to her gown. Clothes had become unimportant — as unimportant as the appearance of her hands and hair. She was not concerned with how she looked, but wholly with what she had to do. If her long, tense walk up here had tired her, she did not feel it. She came back through the door proudly, smiling over her load.

"Lordy!" exclaimed Allston. "But you shouldn't be doing that. You make me feel like a limp cad."

She lowered her burden to the side of the hearth. Then dropping to her knees she picked out the smaller pieces and piled them criss-cross in the ashes, adding larger pieces on top.

Allston watched her, fascinated, in spite of his discomfort. She may have looked at odd times more beautiful than now, but never since he had known her. For all her beauty was of herself. Her hair, brown and silken, was unaided by deft fingers. It was so loosely fastened that it seemed as though at any moment it might fall over her shoulders. He hoped and prayed that it might. He wished to see it so — all of it in its full glory.

Had he been a little nearer he would have been tempted to touch it with his fingers.

Her fine features were quite unrestrained. They were subject to no conscious control. And so they appeared softened to the point of tenderness. Her face was half turned from him, but he saw an expression about her mouth of gladness, of eager, childlike interest. Innocent as it was, it bred wild thoughts in him. He wanted those lips nearer. He wanted them within reach of his own lips. And yet, before he would have leaned forward one inch towards them, he would have stopped himself with his own automatic. The wonder of her; but the sacredness of her!

She turned with outstretched hand.

"You have a match?" she asked.

That was the most he could give her—a match. He fumbled in his pocket, found one, and extended his own hand towards her. It was not as steady as it should have been. It was still less steady as in taking it the tips of her fingers touched him. There were kisses in them. He held his breath. If only that match went out so that he could hand her another.

But she was very careful. She nursed the tiny

flame until it burned steadily and then applied it to the smaller twigs. They caught fire and licked up to the larger twigs; sprang from those to the dry splinters until no shadow of hope was left him. The hearth came to life like a roused sleeper. He felt the heat at once. It was welcome.

And she held out her hands towards the dancing golden flames. She had taken the first step towards making this room habitable; the first step towards making it a home. She had brought into it heat and light.

With glowing face she turned towards Allston.

"A fire is such a friendly thing," she exclaimed.

"That fire represents more than friendship," he answered.

She did not take up the argument. She was not interested in words. She had still a great many things to do.

She went out into Bud's kitchen to forage. She did not discover much, but she did find a little coffee in the bottom of a can, and sugar and half a loaf of dry bread. That was enough. It was food and hot drink.

There was no coffee-pot, for Bud had carried that off with him, but she found a couple of tins

that were whole and clean. She brought her treasures back and laid them at his feet.

"Here's a bit of luck," she said.

Every time she spoke, her words seemed curiously inadequate to Allston. This was not a bit of luck, but stupendous good fortune. To drink coffee of her brewing and eat bread of her finding promised a meal to be remembered. It was an event worth all it had cost. It was going to keep her busy near him for the next half-hour.

She made another journey to the spring-house and filled her pails. She brought them back and placed them close to the flames near the dog-irons. She piled on more wood and bade him see that the water did not boil over.

"I must find some clean linen if there is any. That cut—"

He had almost forgotten about the cut. It had ceased bleeding, but it was a matted ugly blotch on his head.

"It can wait, can't it, until I get to the doctor?"

"No," she replied.

Where she secured the clean white strips of cotton with which she returned, Allston never

knew. The torn hem of a ruffled petticoat left behind in the bedroom might have told him had he ever seen it. But he never did. He began to question her, but some instinct warned him that this evidently was none of his business.

He did not seem to have much business of any sort here now. He found himself a good deal under orders — gentle orders, to be sure, but none the less to be regarded seriously. And, as he remembered, this was one of the things he had looked forward to escaping just as soon as he left the army. He had chafed under them; — not openly, because he respected the necessity of them, but inwardly, because they went against the grain. As a free-born American citizen of Southern ancestry and independent means he had, until the war, come pretty near to doing just about as he liked without dictation of any sort. Once he was out of kilts no one had interfered to any extent with the management of his everyday life.

Now this young woman, approaching him with a pail of lukewarm water, tucked a towel around his neck and commanded him to lean his head back. He did so when he would much have pre-

ferred not. Then she proceeded to sop a wet rag against the wound left by Bud Childers's bullet. It was distinctly an unpleasant process. It hurt more or less, and the water trickled down his neck. Besides, he felt that this was a distasteful duty which did not come within her province, but that of a surgeon. He offered that argument, but she kept on.

"I'm afraid I'm not much of a nurse, but I'm sure this ought to be done," she said.

"You're a wonderful nurse," he assured her.

"I'm trying not to hurt."

"It hurts you more than it does me. It's such a messy thing to bother with."

"If he had come an eighth of an inch nearer," she trembled.

"I'm surprised he didn't. I thought he was a better shot."

"Oh, it was wicked of him!"

"It was more or less human. You see, he didn't understand."

"He's more like a savage than a man."

"And yet it's so easy for any of us to misunderstand," he said.

She was still sopping, rinsing frequently the

carmine from the rag. It was coloring the water in the pail like red pigment.

"He wanted Roxie as a beast wants his prey. But Roxie—"

"Was worth fighting for," he broke in.

"Why did she go with him? She could have roused the house."

"Yes," he answered slowly. "She could have done that—and she didn't. Women *are* queer."

He had thought for a moment that he could tell this woman beside him the whole story, but he found his lips sealed. After all this was not his story; it was Roxie's. It was of too sacred a nature for him to reveal. He felt as though he had overheard something not intended for his ears; the holy revelations a woman makes only to herself. The part of a gentleman was to forget them; to treat them as though they had never been. In these last few minutes he had forgotten even the girl herself. He realized it with a start.

"Where is she?" he demanded. "If Childers took her off—"

"Even he couldn't do that against her will," said Wilmer. "Please to be quiet."

"You think that?"

"You don't know those girls."

"I—I guess you're right," he admitted.

"It's probable she escaped into the woods. If she didn't—"

"The woods," he nodded. "She had the other door. She had a fair chance if she kept her head."

"And she knew the man through and through."

"The devil! He gnawed through those ropes like a rat."

The woman by his side grew pale.

"It's a miracle you're alive," she said.

"I don't know. I don't know."

The old familiar phrase steadied her in one way and unsteadied her in another. It sent her thoughts back for a moment to the evening before. He did not know—any more than he knew then. But she—how much she had come to know in these last few hours! And yet not by the slightest token must she let him know that she knew. She must maintain a stricter guard over herself than ever before. She must be careful of her eyes, her speech, her hands—especially her hands. Lightly they caressed the cut over his temple, but only in the course of her duty. And his tousled hair was so near her now.

A moment later, in the course of duty, she found a better opportunity. She wound strips of white bandage around and around his head, her fingers brushing his head — ever so gently, ever so lovingly, in the course of duty.

And he, sitting very quiet, his eyes closed, felt them like kisses — ashamed at the thought. He did not know. Lord! he did not know even then — and might never know.

The coffee began to boil. She left his side and poured some of the hot brew into a tin dipper and ordered him to drink it. After the first sip it is doubtful if he would have drunk it except under orders. She had sweetened it liberally but it was a muddy concoction.

She gave him bits of the stale bread and ordered him to eat them. He obeyed — as smartly as though it were an order of the day.

Quite without resentment, too.

"Aren't you going to join me?" he asked.

She tried a little of the coffee and made up a wry face.

"It isn't very nice," she admitted.

He was about to agree with that when she added quickly:

"But it's good for you."

So he took his medicine—to the last drop.

Up to this time she had been very busy. Now, after going out and getting another armful of wood, there seemed to be nothing to do but wait. He was too weak to walk and she did not dare to leave him even long enough to go back for help to one of those neighboring houses she had passed below.

She had to wait—facing him. That is a difficult task—when one has a secret trembling in the eyes, on the lips, and on the tips of the fingers.

CHAPTER XXVI

Bud had never heard a woman cry as Roxie cried. He had heard them whine and heard them lament and seen their faces grow stolid with grief, but that was all in the day's work. He was always able to pass on and forget. It was no affair of his, and women were doomed to a certain amount of that sort of thing.

But this time the sobs got under his thick, leathery skin. They pierced still deeper — into the core of him, into the heart of him. His eyes upon her sagging form; upon the hair which so lately had been blown across his cheek as he bore her away, insensible, over his shoulder; upon the small hands crowded against her face; he felt an ache that was like the ague. And yet there was a significant difference. The pains of the fever were personal. They concerned him and his own body. But now he was hurt not because of himself, but because she was hurt — this other.

That was difficult to understand. The more so because, in reality, he had his own grievous wound. She was crying because he had killed

that pink-cheeked furriner — crying because she had cared for the man. For a moment that memory did serve to harden him, but — she kept on crying. She was hurt. There was no pretense about it. She was suffering like a wounded pet. The cause of her grief did not matter.

Bud's heart went out to her as it never had to any other living thing. Dropping his rifle to the ground he rose.

"Roxie," he faltered, "don' take on like thet."

She did not move. She gave no indication that she heard. He took a step nearer, his long arms hanging loosely by his side; his face troubled.

"I 'm a-talkin' to yuh, Roxie," he said.

There was, in his voice, the deep tenderness of a lover and of a father, too. Huddled in a heap as she was, she looked such a tiny body. He could have picked her up without effort. And he ached to do just that — to pick her up and hold her close. He felt that so he could shield her from harm.

Because she did not protest, he ventured still nearer. He was at her side now, still standing erect.

"Gawd!" he said, "Gawd, how I love yuh!"

At that Roxie sprang — upright and sideways towards Bud's rifle. But Bud was there before her. He moved instinctively. That gun was as much a part of him as his right hand. He snatched it from the ground, and as he did so the girl recoiled.

The two faced each other again; Roxie shrinking away in fear at the revenge he might take for this attempt, Bud feeling more helpless with the rifle in his hands than without it.

She had tried to get the gun. If she had succeeded, she would have killed him. She hated him as fiercely as that. A woman is not often tempted to kill, but when she is so tempted she is dangerous. And yet the realization of this hatred, instead of rousing him to aggressive action, instead of urging him to retaliation as ordinarily it would, had quite the opposite effect. It took all the spirit out of him — all his courage and high hopes. His arms grew limp. The hills about him, instead of offering protection, hemmed him in like prison walls. No use now in climbing them or crossing with her to the valleys beyond. With her ready to spring upon him, whether he was there or here made little differ-

ence. Whether he was here or anywhere made no difference now.

An overpowering sense of helplessness pressed down upon him. Never before had he faced a situation, however desperate, where he could not find relief in physical action. Always there was something to break through or down; always there was a shooting chance. But here there was nothing to strike; nothing over which a rifle bullet had any control. He could still carry her off, to be sure, but what would he be carrying? Just the shell of her, and this love of his was genuine enough to turn away from that. He wanted more, but the more that he wanted could not be taken. He could have it only as it was given. And no man can force a gift.

Here was an idea new to Bud Childers; all that a woman has of love worth while must come to a man as a gift. Love is not anything to be seized with the hands. It is not the flower; it is the perfume of the flower. It is not the hair, the lips, the hands, but the soul. Else one woman would be like another woman and not worth the struggle.

It was quite useless for Bud to carry the girl

any farther back into the hills. He must allow her to return to her own. But after that—what of himself?

Bud's eyes wandered a moment—from the frightened girl to the heavy forest growth surrounding her. The trees had always been his friends. He had played among them as a child, hunted among them as a boy, and lived among them as a man. They had furnished him a home, food, protection, and companionship. But they failed him now. They offered no encouragement. They remained as blank and as dumb as so many trees. They turned to Roxie rather than to him. Perhaps this was in revenge for the axe he had driven deep into the heart of so many of their fellows.

He raised his eyes to a squirrel frolicking among the branches—a red boomer who chattered saucily in his face. He raised his eyes to the sky and the sky gave him no answer.

He was conscious of a deep and awful sense of desolation—as though he had suddenly been abandoned by all creation. He was n't much on religion, but there was something of religion in his feeling. Gawd A'mighty was getting his

revenge. He was alone as he had never been alone — alone even here in his own mountain country. And his long face grew haggard at the thought.

Bud Childers brought his eyes back to Roxie. He found her still watching him — suspiciously, alertly. Her eyes stabbed like knives. He could bear it no longer. With a suppressed cry, he tossed the gun to her feet.

"Shoot ef yuh want!" he cried. "Shoot an' hev done with hit."

The girl picked up the rifle. She held the butt firmly against her shoulder and covered him. And, instead of quailing, she saw him stand a little more erect, his eyes full upon her. With her finger upon the trigger she sighted along the barrel to the left of his broad, exposed chest. She had only to bend that finger ever so little and Allston stood revenged. This was no more than simple justice. She repeated that word to herself — justice — as she raised her eyes to the gray of Bud's eyes. The man did not flinch. He was holding himself taut, ready to receive the blow, but he did not flinch.

His eyes were gray, but there was blue in them. They were gray, but there was light in them.

They were gray, but back of them there was the magic of the dawn. It was as though something was a-borning there. Something a-borning to which her mother heart, willy-nilly, responded. She tried to fight off the emotion, but her trigger finger weakened. She tried still to fight it off, but her extended arms began to wobble. She lowered the rifle.

"Bud Childers," she said, "you knowed I could n' do thet. You knowed I could n' kill."

"I reckoned you 'd kill me ef yuh hed the chanst," he replied seriously.

"You 're speakin' honest?"

"I reckoned yuh would."

Her mind was working quickly. She did not fully believe yet that any such change of heart had come over him. She was half ashamed to believe it. It was not like Bud to give up in this wise. He was depending upon her weakness. But there was one way to test him — one way that would prove conclusively if the man meant what he said or not.

"Bud Childers," she called, "hit ain't fer me to hand out justice, but thar 's them thet will. An' ef yo 're hones' ye 'll walk back to th' valley an' pay like a man fer what yuh done."

A rifle bullet would have been merciful in comparison with those words. Bud staggered back a little—just a very little. He recovered quickly. Everything in his nature—everything there up to a few minutes ago—rebelled at the suggestion. The world swam about him. And yet here was a direct challenge—a challenge flung in his face. The eyes before him were even now, at this hesitancy, filling with mocking laughter. The lips were curling in scorn.

"You—you ax me to do thet?" he faltered.

"I *dare* yuh to do thet," she answered.

He turned on his heels and led the way back to the mountain road.

Roxie followed the tall, stooping figure as though in a dream. She was not convinced even now that he intended to fulfill any such purpose. Yet without faltering he led the way through the bushes and out into the road, pausing to wait for her when his long stride took him too far ahead. And more than once she found her own steps lagging. She was urging this man to his death and he was going willingly. Never once did he give any sign of weakening. She watched his big muscular body as it swung along the road in

front of her—watched it with a feeling of awe. It was so expressive of life—so vibrant with energy. It did not seem right to kill anything like that—even in the name of justice. Yet Allston, too, had been vibrant with life, and then—

The memory hardened her young face. She grasped the rifle firmly and followed more rapidly.

They were nearing the shack. It was a question of only a few more minutes and this issue would be taken out of her hands forever. How long it was she had been gone she did not know, but it seemed like hours. The chances were that by now the searchers were up here. At every turn of the winding road she half expected to see a challenging figure. She peered ahead shrinkingly. But Bud never even glanced up. He plodded on like one in a dream.

She paused once—deliberately. Perhaps, if he found himself out of sight of her, he might make a dash for liberty. But his ears apparently were alert, because within three steps he stopped in his turn and swung to see what had become of her. So once again their eyes met.

The fool! Why didn't he take his chance? Once around that little bend he could have swerved into the undergrowth and disappeared. Instead of that he just stood there waiting. His eyes asked nothing of her — nothing of any one.

Resting the butt of the rifle on the ground, she leaned upon the barrel as upon a staff.

"'T ain't fer now," he said encouragingly.

It was not far for her, but for him — it might be a journey without end. That thing called law was helpless as long as a man kept in the hills, but once he came down into the valley it had the strength of a giant. She remembered stories — stories told to illustrate the might and majesty of the law; of how certain men had struggled and run and twisted and turned in vain in their attempt to escape the sheriff. And her sympathies always had been with the man — as they were with the fox against the hounds. The law was necessary and should be respected. She had learned that at the Mission school. But the law, too, was a vague outside force — a foreign force. More often than not it was associated with men from the county seat or from that far-off place called Washington.

Bud waited patiently while she stood there in a tremble. She did not want this Thing to catch him. She did not want him dragged off and put in prison or possibly killed. She was a valley girl, but these mountains were part of her. It was as though she were surrendering Caterpillar Ridge. As long as she could remember she had associated these woods with Bud Childers. The fool! Why didn't he run instead of waiting for her?

"Reckon we'd better be rackin' erlong," he said.

So she started once more, and then, unexpectedly, they were around a turn and in full view of the clearing before the shack. Her eyes were drawn as by a magnet to the spot where she had last seen the crumpled form of Allston. It was not there. Moreover, smoke was coming from the cabin chimney. Some one was here—but not the crowd she had expected. Not a soul was in sight.

"Wanter turn in thar?" asked Bud.

Roxie caught her breath.

"Whar *is* he?" she trembled.

"They mought ha' kerried him inside," he said in a voice grown dead.

With that he went on again, across the log towards the shack. She followed close at his heels, afraid of what she might see. Twice her hand was almost upon Bud's arm, but she was not sure, even at this moment, of what she ought to do.

CHAPTER XXVII

Allston was facing the door when the two figures came out of the road. He sprang to his feet reaching for his automatic. Wilmer was bending over the fire.

"What is it, Ned?" she asked, without turning.

"I 'm going outside a moment. Wait here," he ordered.

Before she grasped the full meaning of his words, he was across the threshold and in the open, his gun half raised, his eyes full upon the eyes of Bud Childers.

Roxie stared as at one risen from the dead. She stood transfixed. Had it not been for the bandaged head which gave Allston his one touch of reality, she would not have been able to breathe. As it was she breathed deeply and slowly and softly as before an apparition which might vanish at a sound. And her hand, like a child's, sought Bud's hand. She gripped it with all her might.

Then another figure appeared at the door—

the figure of a woman. There was reality enough about Wilmer Howe. After one glance she rushed out and threw herself in front of Allston, reaching up her white arms to his shoulders, shielding him with her body. Very gently Allston tried to turn her one side, but with a moaning cry she clung.

"No! No! No!" she choked.

Roxie saw Allston's half-raised arm lower and saw it sweep around this woman.

It was then she had to hold herself steady; then that she had to face the truth however much it hurt. She, after all, was not the Princess of the fairy story, but this other. The book over which she had dreamed was roughly snatched out of her hands, and the covers closed before her eyes —the story unfinished. And yet—and yet perhaps that was the way with fairy stories. Perhaps it was just so they were able to live on forever. They stood for dreams—unfinished dreams. The Prince himself was smiling. She winced at that.

Bud felt the soft fingers on his hand relaxing. It was not till then that he removed his eyes from Allston. Suddenly this other man did not matter. Once again he was alone with Roxie — alone

with Roxie in the hills. And the mountains round about him, instead of closing in, stood back to give him room — room for his big full heart. He was breathing the air of a free man once more. The trees were his brothers. The birds were singing — golden notes in an air filled with sifted fine gold. And a saucy little red squirrel chattered excitedly in a tree overhead.

Bud stooped and swept the girl into his long arms. Against her feeble protests, he held her tight.

And lo! Roxie found another story-book open before her eyes.

Whatever took place up there in that shack by Big Laurel Cove was never satisfactorily explained either to the local gossips or the local authorities.

As Daddie Ingram expressed it to the group which gathered at the post-office:

"Thar's suthin' purty durned quar 'bout the hull bisness."

Perhaps there was. Both Wilmer Howe and Roxie might have agreed with him on that, and there were certain details that neither Bud nor

Allston ever fully understood. It was queer business, but as far as those most immediately involved were concerned an eminently satisfactory business. The wedding of Bud and Roxie which took place a week later at the Howe bungalow seemed to be proof of this. That was a memorable event in the neighborhood. Every one was invited and every one came and every one appeared to be happy.

"But," as Daddie Ingram said later, "'co'se Bud Childers is Bud Childers an' thar ain' no gittin' round thet. Roxie'll hev to watch her step livin' 'long o' him."

Daddie was a wise old owl and his opinion carried weight. It was rather too bad, then, that he could not have been present eight months later when Allston and his wife climbed the mountain road to visit Bud and Roxie. Together they took the same trail that separately each had taken once before — along the sandy road skirting the valley and up through the dark forest. If here where the woods smell damp Wilmer clung to Allston's arm, it is nobody's business. Once through the leafy tunnel and on the open ridge looking down upon the sunlit valley, Wilmer paused and, placing her hands upon her hus-

band's shoulder, looked straight into his blue eyes and whispered:

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For Thou art with me."

Reverently he kissed her white forehead.

So they went on into the dragon country, fearing nothing, their hearts singing. As they approached the clearing they heard the sound of a hammer and found Bud busy upon a substantial addition to the cabin — a generous front porch made of planed boards. He stepped forward cordially to greet them.

"Roxie's in thar," he said with a jerk of his thumb towards the interior. "An' she'll shore be mighty proud ter see yuh."

As the two approached the door he stood aside to allow them to pass. He himself stopped a moment before a rather conspicuous doormat bearing the word "Welcome." Rather sheepishly he lagged behind to wipe his heavy boots clean of all dirt.

"Roxie's kinder fussy 'bout mud," he explained.

THE END

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